GOLDEN TIME
ゴールデンタイム
2
答えはYES
竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト・駒都えーじ
電撃文庫

ゴールデンタイム
GOLDEN TIME

2
答えはYES

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト●駒都えーじ
デザイン●ビィピィ

CAST

多田万里 …… 主人公。上京してきた大学一年生。

加賀香子 …… お嬢様。超完璧。
いや、ほぼ完璧。だいたい完璧。……多分完璧。

柳澤光央 …… 万里の友達。通称やなっさん。

林田奈々 …… 二年の先輩。通称リンダ。

岡千波 …… ほっこりラブリーな森ガール。XSサイズ。

二次元くん …… 三次元に絶望した男。本名佐藤。

ゴールデンタイム GOLDEN TIME

ゴールデンタイム2
GOLDEN TIME
答えはYES
FRESHMAN'S COMPA

AFTER THE REHEARSAL OF OMAKEN
ゴールデンタイム2
GOLDEN TIME
答えはYES

Golden Time

Volume 2

~The Answer is YES~

Written by:

Takemiya Yuyuko

Illustrations by:

Komatsu Eeji

Hosted by:

Baka Tsuki

Translator:

rpapo

Disclaimer:

All materials' copyrights reserved by their respective

authors and the associated publishers. Please respect their rights. Works will be deleted upon request by copyright holders.

Prologue

The color of their class T-shirts was yellow.

On the front side, in large characters fading from deep green to orange was their graduation year, "3-4", drawn with a font to make them appear as if they were flying out towards you. On the back side in light blue was their home-room teacher's name, and then all forty of the class member's names were written in small letters, made to look like an English-language newspaper.

Though it looked rather crude, the design wasn't bad. If you were to look at it finished, you might very well call it something a high-schooler had made as a memento of graduation.

But to get to this point was a battle.

It was good to see the enthusiasm, "Let's make matching goods for the whole class!", but first they argued about whether to make T-shirts, ecobags or straps, and when they settled on making T-shirts, they then argued about the color, the design, the font... anyhow, they argued about everything the whole time. Did they argue so much on purpose?

Nevertheless, there was nobody speaking out, saying "enough, stop it". Everybody was aware of how much time remained before they graduated. Their state: the home room shut down and everybody arguing at once, would not happen a second time in their lives. Perhaps it was because they knew they wouldn't have another chance.

From gathering everybody's opinions, to placing an order with a contractor, had taken two whole months.

From that point they waited another month, and forty special order T-shirts arrived at the end of February.

In class, since springtime, half of them had decided their lines of study.

Of the remainder, some still had to take their entrance exams, some were still awaiting the results of their exams, some had decided to try again next year, some were working various part time jobs, and some were hoping to take over their family businesses.

Whether bright or gloomy, anyhow everybody had their own outlook. Even though their various circumstances varied, on that day everybody’s face was present in the classroom.

They lovingly passed around the plastic bags from the cardboard box, each with T-shirts packed inside. Waiting until everybody got theirs, they opened their bags simultaneously with a tearing sound.

All at once, shouts of joy erupted.

They went through the invoice, figured out who's was who's, and got them all passed out. It was nice to see such reasonableness from high school students. Things got more lively right away. One after another people put them on over their uniform shirts, pointed at each other while telling each other "It looks good on you!", gave each other high-fives, mugged to have their pictures taken with cell-phones, and even, overcome with emotion, put their arms weirdly over the shoulders of their fellow classmates.

In the middle of such uproar, nevertheless alone, seated in a chair, frozen in place as if he were dead, there was one more fellow.

"My name..."

He was Tada Banri.

"My name... is the only one missing..."

Banri was running his finger back and forth over the back side of the T-shirt spread out on his desk, verifying the lined up names over and over again. Slowly, carefully, so as not to mistake any letters for something else.

Yet he couldn't find his own name. However many times he counted them, from the very start he came up with thirty-nine names of students.

His own name only, nowhere.

However many times he checked, it did not change. Eventually, his field of vision began to tremble.

Without warning, he had been erased. It had been decided that he did not exist. Even though he'd always been there. Even though he'd been together here with them.

Or, was it that he only thought he was together with everybody?

He tried to mutter to himself, "Let's turn it all into a joke," but at that very moment, like they'd become a stupid faucet, tears overflowed from Banri's eyes.

This plan, how dare they? They dared remove Tada? How could only he, amongst the forty people in this private liberal arts course of study, with no shuffling since the second year, not notice that he was disliked and being shunned?

Saying "I must be gray!" aloud, he blushed suddenly in embarrassment at his memories. Though he was fully flushed now, strangely, his tension had risen, and Banri stubbornly continued in his assertion. Still alone in the middle of a class roughly half blue and half yellow, he concluded with an odd heat that he was gray. Of course I'm feeling awfully gray! I must be a mix of black and

white! Gray must be my only choice! ---I must have been rejected. Come to think of it, he was even turning yellow. In truth, nobody noticed Banri, and their cold expressions said "You're nothing anyway..."

How could they be this way? How low could they go? They'd broken his heart. If he was going to be publicly humiliated like this, treated like a convicted criminal, he wanted rather to be smashed to little bits and disappear from this place at once.

"Eh!? Banri!? What's with you; what's the matter!?"

The one who noticed Banri secretly choked by tears and gasping, whose body was bent over him and whose face was looking him, was Linda. "What what what, what's happening? What's wrong?", she pulled on his sleeve to shake him.

"M, mai! Mai, dame...!"

---My name isn't there!

Somehow saying only that, Banri turned away Linda's hand and fell flat on his desk.

Wouldn't Linda have known too? Just before preparing for the last scene of their high school life, this excessively cruel play at erasing him.

"Wow, Tada's crying something awful!", some girl commented from behind, and all the happy chattering in the classroom suddenly stopped, and it went completely quiet. Banri thought. Will the public execution start at this point? Hey, you've noticed? It was intentional. We girls, and then the guys, in truth have always thought you were annoying. You have no presence at all. That was just what his friends and others over there had to be thinking... what kind of expression would he need to guard against the cutting edge of such words?

"It's true, what the heck! Teacher! Banri's name isn't here!"

He lifted his tear-stained face.

The truth rang out in Linda's strong voice, her warm hand rested on the back of Banri's blazer as if to cheer him up.

The home-room teacher in front twisted his glasses and said "Are you kidding?", and started verifying the names in the list. Before long, from here and there he could hear "Ah, it's true", "Horrible", "This, of course for Tada we will have to get them to do it over, right?", and so on, and those that had put them on already took them off, and every began to return the T-shirts to their plastic bags.

Finally Banri, from this seeing that he wasn't being shunned, understood that it was merely a mistake of the manufacturer.

And as he understood, suddenly ashamed of having shed a flood of tears, having overreacted to a little mistake,

"...I, I'd thought it was on purpose... in a hurry... I'd thought I'd been left out to die...!"

Trying to somehow restore his sticky face to normal, he hurriedly rubbed around his eyes with both hands. Third-year high school student, male. Even though he might look like one.

"No no no, how could such a thing be? Aah, sheesh, what a dunce you are, Banri. Don't cry over such a thing, now come over here."

While talking as if she were exasperated with him, Linda was rubbing Banri's head with her hands, stirring up his hair as if he were a house dog. "Wow, Tada's really smiling", some girl could again be heard muttering, and Banri in an instant realized that he was grinning.

Linda didn't care, and she looked Banri straight in the eyes,

"Once we're apart... I, for one, will be worried about you. Really and truly. Will you be OK once I'm not here?"

She spoke in a low voice. His grinning face stiffening, at that moment Banri too understood. He could not give an answer, his still-stiffened mouth twitching awkwardly. Once spring arrived, Linda will have left for Tokyo. Himself, here, from Shizuoka, after a year not studying hard enough, could not leave. Because, blast it all, he'd entirely failed to enter the school he'd chosen. The time of their separation, even now, even this very instant, was without a doubt drawing closer.

And then, several weeks to exchange everybody's goods.

By the time the revised class T-shirts, with Tada Banri's name entered correctly, arrived from the vendor, it was the night before the graduation ceremony.

And then today, everybody wearing them, they had a wholesome class party under the supervision of their homeroom teacher, gathered together in a private karaoke room. Tears, tears from a graduation safely achieved, this evening.

It was completely over with by nine o'clock at night.

Banri was walking aimlessly, Linda a little behind him--- he was pretending a certain degree of composure, but in truth, in his heart he was barely there as they walked.

A mild breeze, a little strong, was disturbing what remained of the day's clear skies and warm weather.

This area was not like that near Banri's home, rather than tea plantations there were normal farms, and then rather than farms there were many houses. There were convenience stores with

spacious parking lots, and there were little co-op housing units with gaudy towel-blankets with character designs, indecently hung out to dry. There were local bookstores, a takoyaki place with an octopus on its sign, and a candy-store, and if they were to look a bit to the other side, a huge and brilliantly illuminated billboard for APiTA washing out the night sky. Three two-seated bicycles passed them by, even in the darkness they could tell it was a Brazilian family.

Though they were graduated from high school, until three days ago they had still been high-schoolers.

While the two of them were walking in such a vague, ambiguous night, Banri finally spoke the words he had been preparing forever.

"...Yes, or no?"

Upon leaving the intersection, Linda slowly turned towards him. There wasn't anybody else crossing. Right now there weren't cars either.

Beneath the streetlight in the quiet of the night, he couldn't see the expression on her face very well for the shadows. In Linda's hand was a paper bag. She had put a long-haired brown wig in there. Banri was holding a blonde wig openly in his right hand. Banri as Lady Gaga, Linda as Beyonce. They'd done a duet in full character, showing off in front of the whole class.

"I would like a clear answer. This is the end of the beginning. For that reason, I would like a one word answer."

The duet came off pretty good. Banri and Linda really were a good combination. While their classmates were half in shock, they laughed and said they were the same as ever.

"I don't want to be separated from you. If we are separated, it will never be OK. ...Because I love you. I want to be with you every day. I want to be with you forever. I don't want to go out with any other girl, nor do I want you to date some other guy. To be best friends, or like brother and sister, perhaps, is no longer what I need. If you were to have the same feelings... to love me, to come to love each other, if you thought so towards me... I, want to go to Tokyo with you. My parents even told me it was OK to go to a public preparatory school in Tokyo to get ready. But then, afterwards... afterwards I would be alone. I would just like Linda's answer."

Yes?

No?

Catching the wig from the inside with his finger and swinging it around, Banri watched it motionlessly. The tangled bunch of hair shone with a smooth tint that looked fake. He'd bought it off the net. For 2900 yen. In the same way pretending to not be concerned, however, but, in reality--- kind of like the wig. Not even wanting to look. Looking not even being necessary. But not knowing if it was OK to look anywhere. As it was, if he were to stand up the shivering of his

miserable form would expose him.

Turning towards Banri, Linda held up one finger.

As if he were a cat, Banri’s eyes were captured by that fingertip.

"Could you wait a bit for me? ...Let me sleep on it. Is that OK?"

He nodded.

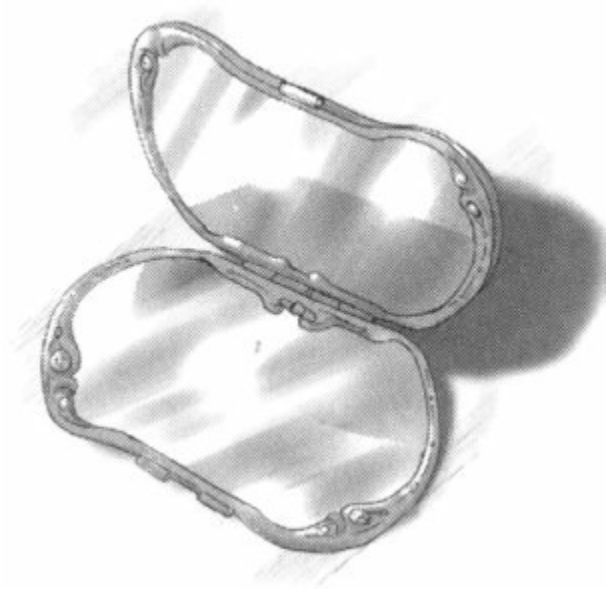
He picked up his wig from where it had fallen to the ground. Lightly wiping off the tangled artificial wig, thinking a bit about what was best to do,

"Understood. See you tomorrow then. I’ll be waiting for your answer."

For the time being, he put it on his head.

"Since I’ll be waiting..."

Chapter 1



Tada Banri was being dumped by a girl.

Because of the overly annoying noise coming from several g nhjuys at five in the afternoon at a Caffe Veloce, Banri was still off guard,

"But we only just started going out,"

"Yes, though being with Tada-kun is so much fun..."

"Therefore, from here on out would it be OK if we were just friends?"

Stating his request with a three lined conversation like that, he went quiet, hanging his head.

For no particular reason, he still had the wrapper from a straw in his right hand.

The wrapper swayed limply in the breeze from the air conditioner. His back bent, Banri inhaled the heavy smell of tobacco smoke into his lungs.

The non-smoking section existing in name only (can you call decorative plants a separation from the smoking section?); seated across the table from Banri was Kaga Kouko.

Earrings glittering on both her ears, her glamorous coral pink lips quietly closed, taking a sip of ice tea through her straw. She was opening her big eyes as if trying to peek at Banri's now fallen expression. Perhaps waiting for Banri to say something, her back straight, she put the glass in her hand down on a small tray.

Tada Banri, however, remained silent.

Getting uncomfortable after a bit, Kaga Kouko also dropped her gaze.

Several minutes passed by, idly. The two of them continued looking down at each other's hands.

I am the Banri from before, and I want to break into this awkward silence, saying "This is awful, hold on, do something please!", but there is nothing I can do.

And now, even such a prepared request, because this guy cannot deal with it emotionally! When little situations arise, his mind goes to pieces, because he can never see the world before his eyes! Or rather, he returned from Shizuoka a little bit ago, having seen what was back home, and from that, ---what a mess. I would shout, but nobody would hear me.

Because I know that, I am sitting quietly on a seat behind and to the side of Banri.

As it is, nobody hears my voice any more. Nobody sees my body. Nobody knows of my existence. Because I, am dead.

To put it simply, I've become a ghost.

Wandering about without a body as a ghost, I drift about like this, always near Banri's side.

...That shouldn't be all that difficult for a living human being to believe. But as for me, while I was living, I hadn't believed in the existence of ghosts. From my own experience, I've gained an alternate view of the world. Even now I know nothing about the existence of UFOs. Neither do I know anything about the continent of Mu. Nor do I know anything about sea serpents nor the Loch Ness Monster. Nor about ESP. But one thing I do know about: the existence of ghosts.

While I was alive, my name was Tada Banri. I was Tada Banri. From the time I was born for eighteen years, I existed as Tada Banri.

In the spring of my eighteenth year, I fell from a bridge into a river. At that moment, I fell out of my body, so to speak, and I, the Tada Banri that was, was left behind as a soul without a body.

On the one hand, the Banri who'd lost his soul lived for a time as "The Memory Loss Boy", easily became a college student, and was now even being dumped by a girl. Such were the circumstances in which we found ourselves.

Now, the living Tada Banri, his denimed rear situated on a narrow seat, bent over and vaguely pouting, eyes glazed over, breathing the smoky air, wordlessly sipped slowly on his iced café latte.

Surely, inside, he was a wreck---.

Reaching from behind and to the side, I move my hand towards Banri's shoulder. I pat his

shoulder, telling him to calm down. To my hand, it definitely feels like a living body. But Banri doesn't feel my touch. Not even noticing my existence, not even a blink of uncertainty. He might not have even noticed, but he was grinding his teeth so hard they were creaking. Doing that, sooner or later the lower left wisdom tooth would get to bleeding and hurting.

A forgotten storm blowing through Banri's heart, I suddenly understood the reason why. I even think, if there were anything I could do, I would cheer him up. I know what Banri wants to do, I want to answer him. But, whatever words I use, this voice never reaches Banri's ears. There is nothing more I can do.

The culprit in putting Banri into his state of confusion: Linda--- no, am I wrong? There isn't anybody else. It is this me.

Something Banri had seen a few hours before, on a short trip home he'd made to Shizuoka... which, since he'd woken from his accident, had become sealed away in his high school graduation album. Stuck inside, how many pictures?

Records of when I was alive, in other words a record of Banri's unknown Banri, were stirring up Banri's heart.

And now, in front of Banri's eyes, the girl to whom he had just confessed yesterday was sitting. Several minutes ago she had shaken Banri cautiously,

"...Tada-kun?"

She said, cocking her head to the side in curiosity. "Well, what I had to say... did you hear?"

Abruptly, Banri lifted his face,

"Eh!? Y, yes!? I heard, but!?"

At that moment, with all his heart, he nodded ambiguously,

"Uwaa!"

He knocked his half-emptied glass of iced latte over, really hard. The glass fell to the floor and broke to bits, the loud noise echoing to the back of the shop. The other noisy customers suddenly all went quiet, looking over here. Without thinking, I covered my eyes too. Aah, he felt guilty... if a ghost in a ghostly way, could have caught the glass in mid-air... oh well.

Banri stood up in a hurry,

"Wow, wow, sorry sorry sorry! Excuse meee! I've spilled it! Excuse me, is everything OK!? I'm very sorry!"

While calling for the staff, turning in every direction and bowing his head, he lifted Kaga

Kouko's bag from the floor where it had been to a chair, grabbed a bunch of napkins, and tried to contain the flow of latte that was turning into a small sea on the table. In spite of this, drops were staining Banri's bluejeans. Kaga Kouko put pocket tissues from her bag into the embankment too, but the seat and floor were getting to be sopping wet.

An employee with a mop and dustpan came quickly, gathered up the pieces of glass, restraining Banri by telling him "it's dangerous". Dropping his feeble butt into a seat, "Ahh, no more, no more...", Banri, rather upset, let his shoulders slump and sighed.

"What a careless person I am... already, sloppy, too crude, too indecisive... I mean, I'm really sorry Kaga-san, are you OK? Your clothing and such, it didn't get dirty?"

"I'm fine, nothing came this way."

"Your evidence bag? It didn't get wet?"

"Really, I'm fine, nothing, no-thing..."

So as to not interfere with the cleaning, the two of them half raised their feet, held for a brief moment in this pose by their abdominal muscles.

The unshaven mugs of his Jack Purcells, and the toes of her beautiful high heeled sandals, were lined up, nearly touching. The mop came up to my feet too, and I automatically raised my feet to the same pose. As if I could interfere with the cleanup not having a body, as if somehow these feet could get in the way of the employee in his careful mopping.

Banri, and the Kaga Kouko who dumped Banri, faced each other that way for a little while with their feet raised, their feet not touching, keeping their distance perfectly, the two of them alike, their eyes downcast and not saying anything.

The two of them blinked many times, as if they were in a competition against each other. They didn't look all that much like "good friends". Somehow even I felt uncomfortable, and we all looked downwards.

* * *

The first-period Chinese I lecture finished, their busy old Chinese lecturer left the small classroom and then the students followed, one by one, out into the dark corridor. Up to thirty people were allowed to enroll for the language lecture, and it just so happened that all of them were freshmen.

"Tada Banri, well done."

"You really stood out today. You did it."

Suddenly he had quite a few friends. People smiled when they passed by, lightly slapping Banri's shoulder.

Answering as needed with an "Oh", or an "Ah", he heard "Tada-kun well done!", "Super well done!", "Really, really good" ...this time, they were girls. The threesome was dressed almost, but not quite, alike in their showy hairstyle and clothing, and one by one they each waved at him, smiling. It seemed that suddenly his time had arrived! Guys and girls alike were entranced by Banri! So quickly he'd become the most popular in the Chinese class! But it wasn't that way at all. Even Banri understood that they were simply teasing him.

Half desperately, he was about to smile and say, "Especially well done!", and wave back to the girls,

"Banri, hey, don't bother."

Yanagisawa Mitsuo (whom he tended to call Yana-ssan rather than Yana), with whom he'd become close friends since they started college, was calling him.

"Ah, Yana-ssan... it looks like I'm already a mess."

Too exhausted even to smile in courtesy, Banri finally, slowly shoved his texts into his bag. Today's lecture was truly awful.

In the middle of the lecture, he was taken to task by the speaker for absentmindedly staring off into space. "Tada-kun, come to attention!" Trapped, he recited, "Maa, maa, maaa, maa!" ---He was forced to repeat the four basic tones of Mandarin Chinese to the point of going mad. And after that, as the rest of the students read their texts he got suspicious again, and "Tada-kun, Come to attention!" "Now!" "Be an example for everybody! Now!" "Maa, maa, maaaa, maa!" That was it.

Yanagisawa sat on the edge of his desk, waiting for Banri to get ready while,

"You are quite a mess. Ah, here's some chewing gum!"

He gladly collected the gum from where it had fallen, to one side of the desk.

"Such torture! I mean, already, from the very first period, I'm lost. Horribly defeated. Why do such things happen to me in particular? And the girls were giggling a lot..."

"Well, during that time of the 'Maa!'s, you made the most incredibly good face."

"A good face? You're kidding, what kind of face was I making?"

"This kind. 'Maa!'"

He made an imitation of Banri's face, suddenly opening his eyes wide while lowering his left shoulder quite a bit, and sucking his cheeks in furiously. Of course, in keeping with that awful mug,

"R, really? I made that kind of face? So I've become this department's number one funny face?"

Disconcerted, Banri pulled a mirror out of his pocket, and opening it looked at his own face while trying to say "Maa!" again. Not to where Mitsuo would see him doing it, but certainly modeling in three dimensions what he had a hard time imagining, he found himself more and more gloomy, wondering 'How many times have I shown this face to everybody else...?'

"Huh, what's that? That's sparkling something awful!"

While Mitsuo laughed, he wasn't pointing at his face, but rather at the incredibly flashy mirror in Banri's hand. For something a college male might have, it was too much, overly luxurious like something from Swarovski.

"...Ah, you noticed, of course? Do you think it strange that I have it?"

"Do I think it strange? Well, I don't think it suits you. How'd you wind up with it?"

"It was given to me."

With a snap, he closed it and handed it over to Mitsuo. Turning it over to look at it, his simple good looks stiffened.

"...'Remember the anniversary of our escape! Your good friend, Kaga Kouko'...?"

Reading the message written on the back of the mirror with a permanent marker, Mitsuo looked at Banri's face. Once more he looked at the message, and then again at Banri's face.

"What's with this? This is awful."

"Ya... awful, or should I say... I'm not sure as to what she means."

Looking back and forth from the mirror to Banri's face repeatedly, Mitsuo hesitated to speak, looking doubtful. Well, it might even have been an act. As for Banri himself, he thought it quite strange to have something of his called "such a mirror".

"It's not like that, Yana-ssan. It's evidence of our friendship, Kaga-san and I, they're matching mirrors. In that way, of the time when Kaga-san and I became friends. ---That kind of thing."

"'That kind of thing'...?"

"It's merely a statement."

Taking back the hand mirror from Mitsuo, he held it gently in the palm of his hand, sparkling coolly. It was a declaration done as it should be. Kouko had pursued Mitsuo some ten odd years so far, and for now, Banri thought he ought to let others know about their entering into this new relationship as friends. He was thinking about what others must be saying, and thought it a good time to set things straight.

Mitsuo, his face was still pinched like a fox, was muttering things like "Declaration...?"

The mirror weighed heavily in his hand.

Chunky and rounded like a faba bean, on the silver back in white Swarovski crystal an extravagant rose was depicted. Obviously expensive, completely feminine, it didn't suit Banri in the least.

The more he looked at it, the more truly difficult, incredibly complex and extremely hard to describe the feeling became. But Banri carried it around, stuffed in his pocket. He polished it every time fingerprints got on it, and he was careful how he used it.

Because Kouko had told him to do so.

"...Well, in short, it's because Kouko gave you that flashy mirror? To Banri? ...Because you'd become friends?"

"Yes"

"...When? How?"

"On Saturday"

His prominent brow frowning a bit, Mitsuo, still not fully satisfied, was asking with his expression for a continuation of Banri's answer. Banri searched a bit for the words, averting his gaze and looking out into space.

So--- that, what happened on Saturday.

Returning from Shizouka, Banri went by foot to meet up with Kouko. They went to the live house locker to get the stuff they'd forgotten, then to Caffe Veloce to drink tea, then she'd dumped him, they'd became friends, and then she'd given him this mirror.

If he were to tell it all, that was all there was to say.

But he didn't want to tell it straight to Mitsuo like that.

Because he wanted to hide the part about "being dumped" if he could. Mitsuo had dumped Kouko, who in truth had loved him, and in the evening of the same day (even more shamefully), Banri had confessed to her at once. But, she dumped him quickly, the very next day. It was too

embarrassing to talk about, even if it was true.

And so,

"Kaga-san, like this you see, 'Well, Tada-kun, you've got some snot stuck on you', tossing her hair~, 'Try looking with this mirror', fluttering her eyelashes~, 'I'd like to give you that mirror, so you'll be able to take care of yourself the next time you get snot on your face.' We'll match, as proof of our friendship!', flashing her eyes...'. She gave it to me like that."

With a stupid joke, he lied.

He couldn't look over at Mitsuo. He had no idea what kind of face he was showing.

In reality, about this thing, she had said, 'In thanks for your having gone out with me to have fun, and in apology for having gotten drunk and caused you trouble. And, as proof of our friendship from now on', as if it were a blessing over the present. Apparently.

Written on the black paper bag in white letters was "Barneys New York".

From the neat and tidy appearance of the paper bag, it looked like it might be something high class, so Banri immediately raised both his hands in front of him. He made that gesture of refusal, and also said with his expression, "You needn't bother with getting such a present."

But, in what was practically a show of strength, Kouko had restrained him deftly. In front of him, her eyes glistening, she had said, 'I wanted to buy it for you, no matter what! Please! Accept it!'. Being asked so very beautifully, there was no way he could not receive it.

And then, encouraged to go ahead and remove the wrapping still on it, this beautiful hand-mirror with a rose design was revealed.

However you looked at it, it was a girlish thing, and very expensive. This time, for sure, Banri was seriously bewildered. It was a shock. How was such a slight, careless, round-faced, hunched over bumpkin to receive this sparking, shiny, gorgeous rose mirror, fit for a queen?

Besides, looking at it from his own point of view, even calling it proof of their friendship from now on was rather strange. In other words, this was a memento of his being dumped... he thought, was it a sort of consolation prize?

But, according to Kouko, 'It may not be Banri-like, but, no matter what I want you to make use of it! Because in this mirror there is meaning, an awful lot of meaning!' --- and so on.

Thinking back upon yesterday's give and take with Kouko was a bit late, and to no purpose, when right before him Mitsuo snorted, as if a little disgusted.

Banri somehow, timidly raised his face. At least, nothing worse was happening.

"...Where, when, was the snot?"

While comparing Banri and the mirror sidelong, Mitsuo's inquiring voice seemed really doubtful. Well then, first of all, shall we get on with this worthless piece of fiction? It feels like we're making a mountain out of a molehill.

He couldn't help but ask himself; after all, it was something only Banri, by himself, of his own accord, felt. Just a little. What of it?

Besides, he couldn't tell the whole truth, he was not under such an obligation. But, he thought, shouldn't he keep his relationship with Kouko entirely to himself? Perhaps? He might have been forgetting about how he was managing his relationship with Kouko.

In that case, remember you idiot! Surrendering himself to the growing opportunity,

"So, that wasn't what we said on Saturday! Take a look back at Friday. You gave Kaga-san quite the manly whack, didn't you? Hey, remember? In one fell swoop you chopped her down, didn't you? You said the two of you were no longer related to each other...!"

He even included a gesture as of swinging a sword downward from above.

Rather quiet and averting his eyes, Mitsuo responded with only a groan. He had thought that what he had just done was simply from ill temper, but,

"After that, Kaga-san and I went out to relax and to drink. From which, we went to the live house, and we forgot some stuff there---"

Abbreviate the middle part. ...Besides, he didn't think he was under any obligation to tell it fully.

"---Because of that, on Saturday, we went together to get it back. The stuff we forgot, that is. Then, when we were having tea, suddenly inside my nose there was Pettonton, the semi-transparent self-absorbed alien."

He stole a sidelong fleeting glance at Mitsuo's face.

Mitsuo gave a small nod, as if to say "that so?", but seeming to have realized that he had neither a reason nor the right to interrupt, his mouth was closed tightly and his eyes were still cast downwards.

Such was the state of the friend in front of him, Banri's chest finally ached a little bit for him. Compared with him, he didn't have any responsibilities. Didn't have any, but... his so-called conscience, was calling him scum. The stone somewhere in his chest didn't fall, in fact he could feel it dimly, caught somewhere.

What do I do? Though he was his very closest friend, speaking of events that had happened to you, but that he could not speak of frankly, wasn't an enjoyable situation. But, he didn't want to

speak about what he didn't want to speak about.

"...To the live house. That Kouko, honestly. ...Something doesn't fit."

Mitsuo's voice was quiet, as if speaking to himself. Banri leaned his jaw a little off to the side, and stretched to enter his field of vision, combing up his bangs.

So it was. To the live house. We went. ...It's not a lie. Just a little short on the details.

Mitsuo, his lips crooked, appeared to be brooding, his right thumb rubbing his jaw, but his gaze was still fallen to his feet. What could he be thinking? Was he feeling the strain in the story due to the various omissions strangely made to it? Was he keeping silent because it wasn't his right to interfere with their business anymore?

A strange feeling lodged in his chest, there was one more thing he understood.

Banri's making omissions in his story to Mitsuo, that was not the matter for today.

That was nothing other than the matter of his loss of memory.

He didn't think the conversation was particularly necessary. As far as the nineteen year old human being called "Tada Banri" was concerned, who had lost all of his memories through his eighteenth year, and even he understood it to be a big event, insofar as his personality was concerned. He just wanted his friends to understand him. So, always, from the time they met, he sought the opportunity to talk about it. But that opportunity didn't quite arrive. Misunderstanding how he spoke, they always rejected him as a pitiful, if not sick person.

If the opportunity were to arise, he wondered what kind of thing he could honestly say. With regards to memory loss, with regards to Kouko even. About everything that happened on Saturday. If he wanted to talk to friends, everything.

But that was not now.

Understanding within himself that it was only an excuse, feeling suddenly the urge to do something so he wouldn't seem to have suddenly fallen silent, Banri opened the mirror again and carefully looked at the reflection of his nostrils. His nose was clean.

"Kaga-san really busted out something awful! Though about five times there she threw up."

To only use a cheerful voice, to talk like that was his plan. But, the pale thin face of a nineteen-year-old male reflected in the mirror, looked back at him faintly, more miserable than ever, less confident than ever.

"With Kouko as Banri's friend, at a live house, with boogers, with aliens, vomiting, eh...?"

Mitsuo stood up before Banri and walked away, as if he were confirming the words he'd said,

opening the classroom door wearily.

"What a mess... I mean, of course you don't understand. ...Well, it has nothing to do with you anyway."

Suddenly changing course, Mitsuo turned around as he'd realized something. Standing in the dark windowless corridor, he looked straight back at Banri's face. Once more, seeing him like this from straight in front, Banri noted how really handsome Yana-ssan was, but,

"What do you mean, Banri? On Saturday, if you had only called, we could have talked about what you didn't understand. But there was neither voice mail nor text message all day. You ignored me, and went out to have fun with Kouko?"

"Eh... Though you're telling me so, well... that's the way it turned out."

"..."

With a sound awfully like a growl, Mitsuo's face finally darkened.

But Banri said, "Eh, kid? Wow, you're really bothered!", the moment Mitsuo's face became threatening, and he blinked as if coming to his senses, shook his head from side to side twice, and slapped his own cheek quite hard. The impact even made him stumble. The whole thing took only five seconds,

"Yana-ssan's fallen apart...!"

"I have not."

With a thud combing up his hair, Mitsuo looked back at Banri once more. And then,

"Nothing's broken. ...To put it simply, I am realizing that finally I am becoming just a bit human, clumsy and dim-witted."

Taking a small breath, he stopped talking.

The meaning of it was not well understood by Banri, but after a little bit, his voice replaced by something weak, not very masculine,

"...There are many things to think about. ...If you want to talk about such things a bit, like that stuff on Saturday, you can call me! But... oh well. Enough already. It's OK. It doesn't matter."

Having said something like that, as you might have expected this time, for sure, definite feelings of guilt crowded around Banri's chest.

In reality, many things had happened on Saturday, and if Mitsuo had called he'd entirely forgotten about til now. He may have ruined their friendship.

His hands full of his own problems, if there were any phone calls, or even any text messages, he ignored them. He didn't recall any texts on Sunday either. But of course, Banri was only thinking of his own problems, the whole time wrapped up in a blanket on his futon like a tuna-fish; he didn't remember about Mitsuo at all. He was only thinking of his own problems.

Unable to justify his own insensitivity,

"No, I'm sorry!"

He slapped his forehead trying to behave modestly.

"I even returned home for a bit, flailed about, and completely forgot to call you up! If it's all right with you, I can listen to your story now. Shall we go to the cafeteria or somewhere? I can skip second period easily enough."

And then, having been invited in all sincerity, in friendship to go and play truant, Mitsuo frowned and sadly shook his head from side to side.

"I can hardly be the one absent person, and... what about you, don't you have Civil Law I? Don't you have to be there?"

"I don't have to. Rather, what are you taking, Yana-ssan?"

"Logic"

"That's not a required course, why did you take it!? Is the lecture interesting or something?"

"Completely."

"Well then cut it out, Monday's second period let's go together to Civil Law! Maybe it'd be better to change to that way from now on. Registration still hasn't closed, has it? Which Civil Law class were you in at first?"

"Wednesday fifth period, somebody called Professor Tsukamoto."

"Fifth period! Tsuka who?! Why take such a little thing as civil law, nobody else took such a thing!"

"No, though the guys in the second period were decent... rather, I had already bought the textbook for Logic... 4500 yen... they change only the color of the binding from year to year, and I heard if you didn't show the professor your brand new textbook, he wouldn't accept you for the class..."

"So expensive! Garbage!"

"...But I wanted to take this period's Civil Law class, though. There was even going to be a

famous speaker from television. But, look, I spotted Kouko in the first lecture. Because of that, I stopped and thought..."

Sighing once more, even more deeply, Mitsuo frowned. He muttered that up til now he had not needed to run this way and that to escape Kouko, and as he muttered, his backpack, which had been hoisted to one shoulder, slipped sneakily down to his elbow. As if he were overbalanced by a heavy bag, he wobbled on his feet. Banri, seeing that,

"Err, Yana-ssan, are you, like, feeling OK? ...You aren't a bit shook up?"

He looked again at his friend's face, carefully.

Perhaps it was due to his standing under the old fluorescent lights, but now that he thought about it, his color didn't look too good. On top of that, over just this weekend, had he somehow lost weight? Just a little.

It was spring. May. High season, so to speak, for student apathy. Entered in the university, starting to live alone, the change in lifestyle was big, cut off all at once from his childhood friends, and on top of that, he had said he'd had a fight with his parents. Living through this life, his spirits had fallen a bit, even if there was a bit of bad timing. He had the feeling Yanagisawa Mitsuo was depressed.

And then, just like a trigger,

"...Perhaps, if you wouldn't mind much? The matter of having dumped Kaga-san."

His head still hanging, Mitsuo answered him nothing.

If he was guessing correctly, taking the opportunity to remind of what had happened before, in attitude or speech, was hardly the right thing to do right now. Mitsuo’s dark face looking up at him made Banri practically jump, and finally, in a panic, he followed along inside.

"Bu, but I thought the Yana-ssan of the time was very 'manly'! Besides, Kaga-san would be OK! Understanding your feelings, she can get back on her own two feet! She’s a wonderfully strong person!"

But,

"...That may be. Very much so. Right away, she went to a fun live house. Very much so..."

As soon as he raised his face, Mitsuo glared sharply in reproach, growling at him. But if he didn't follow him, it might make the situation worse. Banri hurried, but Mitsuo however suddenly went quiet, in the end slapping himself on the face twice. Oh! If Banri didn't go inside, then without a doubt he was going to do it again. And so, lowering his face, he bowed down, as if chanting a prayer to a some sinister pagan god.

"I thought that if I could separate myself from Kouko, everything would get better... Despite that, Kouko came to the same university as me... I thought that after all, nothing had changed... Because of Kouko, it was coming to nothing... I thought that if I rejected her clearly, all would be well... That's why it happened... It was bad that I believed it was all Kouko's fault... But from the moment I dumped Kouko as if by sorcery the 'start of my shining life' suddenly ceased to exist, all it accomplished was to make Kouko cry, and moreover now, I'm coming to hear that Kouko's spirits are reviving. Strangely, I was even offending you. ...Ah, sorry... sorry sorry! To put it simply, I, I, I, I well, I was a jerk..."

"Ya, Yana-ssan, hold on..."

Brushing away Banri's unintentionally outstretched hand, Mitsuo looked towards the ceiling, his eyes vacantly staring off into space. And then groaning,

"...I've been incredibly insensitive... ...How should I put it? I've been a churl, or more bluntly, how to put it... a piece of crap...?"

Banri could no longer do anything more about the situation than watch over it.

"...Well then... the piece of crap is going to logic class... bye."

Mitsuo, still looking up at the ceiling, left alone, waving his hand toward Banri. With a strangely vacant gaze and voice. There was no way such a condition could be normal.

"Hold on, hold on, hold on!"

Banri unintentionally became like a certain comedy duo as he settled down and chased after that departing back.

"Yana-ssan, seriously, wait up! Err, well, let's walk to the classroom together!"

"...Huh? Why? It's right over there."

"No, but something... or rather, you're really going to not skip class!? Let's do it! Let's head for the cafeteria!"

"...My stomach isn't empty yet. I haven't missed attending yet."

"It's OK, logic class is no big deal! Or rather, if you flunk it, we can take it together next year! What's more, look, I... In truth I've got a bit of something I want to talk about. Recently a few things have happened, and I'm not sure I can resolve the situation on my own. I haven't explained things well recently, but really, I'm sorry for having ignored you on Saturday! So from now on it's time for some male bonding! Let's talk together, as thick as thieves!"

Suddenly, Mitsuo's feet stopped. Turning towards Banri, strangely quiet, he looked him in the eye.

"Various things happened? Like for example?"

"That, for example, well..."

Repeating once more, 'For example', Banri stopped moving entirely.

I did not explain things well, I left various things out of what I said, for example.

That he had noticed that Mitsuo had come to be the love of Kaga-san's life, for instance.

But she was rejected just like that, among other things.

Rather, what are such things as memory loss?

It looked like he dated Linda in the past he could not remember, for another. When he returned home, he had seen a photo of that, but the 'Linda' of now, revealing nothing, as his club senior doing well for him, yet another. What the heck all that meant, he did not know, and it was making an awful mess of him.

And so on.

"..."

---In the end, he couldn't say anything more.

Banri's mouth still half open, he cast his eyes down and went silent.

Not saying anything more, in front of his friend, he was quiet, unable to move.

Even though he was given the chance to talk, nothing was coming out, because he didn't know what would be OK to talk about. Or perhaps, as far as he was concerned, what the heck was going on, what was he thinking about it, what was he feeling about it? Inside himself, he came to realize that the very idea of talking with friends did not exist.

In short, like anybody else--- he thought of his own affairs as if they were events from a world far away.

These situations, happening all at once, were almost too chaotic; even one at a time he would have a hard time dealing with them.

One example, the matter of being dumped by Kouko, as a matter of fact, he couldn't speak of how much of a shock that was. Whether in pain and crying, or in misery and agony, he was unable to deal with such feelings, not individually. Though of course it was rather complicated for him, in reality, it didn't hurt that much. From now on, as a good friend... even saying such a thing, he didn't think that was a good idea.

With regards to Linda, even more so. To say nothing of what he was feeling, as it was he honestly did not know. What happened in the past he could not remember, beyond that, he could not understand what Linda was thinking. As for the fact that they used to go out together, why did she need to continue pretending not to know about it?

Still, "What might it be?" "What shall I do?" "I don't know." "Why might it be?" ...it was that, over and over again. No matter how many times he asked, there was simply nobody answering. Talking with himself was entirely useless.

"---I don't understand anything. I don't know. For me, really, I don't understand anything. I simply don't remember."

In some ways as if he were paralyzed; inside his head he was in a daze. Messing up his hair rather than scratching out his brain, trying to somehow wake himself up, this time his hand was stopped by Mitsuo.

"...It's OK, I understand. For the time being, both my heart and yours need some rest, it seems certain. Alright, let's go be overcharged fair and square."

* * *

Supporting each other's troubled hearts, binding as friends, they wobbled down the stairs, barely managing to arrive at the first floor student cafeteria.

Because until noon there was still space, there were a lot of seats. Here and there were people chattering yet, and students seeming to be taking a late breakfast seated here and there, beyond whom,

"...Whoa..."

Seeing it suddenly in his field of view, unconsciously Banri reared back. "What?", Mitsuo looked over towards where Banri was looking, noticed and groaned similarly. He stopped walking.

The school cafeteria was fading into a heavy yellowish shade, but that one person's appearance was shining too brightly, sparkling as if it's natural energy were radiating outwards.

As far as Banri was concerned, right now he still didn't know with what kind of face to greet this unknown person. For Mitsuo also, perhaps it was about the same as with Banri... or perhaps now it was difficult to face that person.

Shining glossy and bright, her long, deep brown hair was curled beautifully.

She had a deep, deep blue hairband with shining rhinestones affixed to it.

Her hair flowed straight down her slender back.

They understood even from behind that this was quite the beautiful woman, that hair, that style, the things she had, from her whole body shone forth an aura that said she wasn't an ordinary person.

Feeling their gaze perhaps, or maybe she heard the groans of the two guys,

"Ah..."

Turning back towards them, there was no mistaking her beautiful face.

On her carefully prepared, showy features, bright rose pink lips. They both gasped, so splendid was that beauty.

Dressed perfectly, with impeccable fashion and brand, Kaga Kouko was seated at a somewhat shabby table.

Banri and Mitsuo, and then Kouko's gaze, exchanged looks wordlessly. Each of them according to their circumstances, they were severally at loss for words. How many seconds did the awkward silence continue?

"W, well", Banri awkwardly tried to start the conversation. Morning, Kaga-san, how're you feeling? But look, Yana-ssan didn't make a greeting, neither did Kaga-san--- he set out to take the first step with the seeming tension, but,

"...Maa!"

As if struck by an arrow, Kouko stood up yet quicker.

From between her alluringly rose colored lips, her teeth flashed, pure white with a tinge of blue visible. Graceful like a dancing butterfly she spun around once, swinging her skirt.

"Maa! Maa! Maa!"

Both her hands were squeezed together tightly before her chest, in what was nearly a caricature of a surprised look.

Then, opening her hands suddenly, she slowly tilted her head to one side sharply, and before long from her surprised expression transformed into a wide open, extremely happy smile.

Her hips dropping into a straight, long stride, without batting an eyelash she stepped briskly up before Banri's eyes,

"You're Tada-kun, aren't you!"

He was very much Tada-kun, but--- that moment he was being hugged energetically. His protests ignored, she made as if to kiss him on both cheeks, not quite touching him.

Sh, she was a foreigner...

When Kouko let go of the still astonished Banri, he looked back at her happily laughing face. On top of that, this person was not normally a foreigner. When she was excited, she became one.

Geh, take a look everybody! I got to meet my favorite grandfather after five thousand years buried in the rock on the other side of the world! And on top of that, Grandfather, you brought me as a present a diamond the size of a melon (you were planning two!?)! Sheer happiness!

...Sort of, a warm welcoming excitement.

Despite having just been dumped the day before yesterday at Veloce, there was nothing in her gaze but Tada Banri.

Kouko stopped before Banri's nose, her smile brightened by happiness. Almost too close to him, Banri's field of vision was almost entirely blocked by Kouko's perfect smile. And then she clasped her hands before her chest. Arranging her feet modestly, she bent back a bit and turned her sparkling eyes upwards. Gazing worshipfully at Banri in a posture rather like Xavier,

"My good friend, Tada-kun...! Good morning!"

She was even misty-eyed.

"Because we met this way by chance in the morning, this will be a really good day! Hey, it was absolutely fated long ago that we would be the best of friends!"

She batted her long dark eyelashes adorably while she said that.

Still looking straight at Banri like that, she slowly shook her head from side to side with that smile on her face. She gave the appearance of "This warm feeling, welling up! Ah, I can't stand it anymore!"

"Oh..."

Somehow, his mouth opened.

Go for it! Do your best, Tada Banri!

"...Morning. ...Kaga-san"

As if in ecstasy from listening to Banri's greeting, Kouko moaned and closed her eyes for a few seconds.

"That voice is Tada-kun's. That way of speaking. Incredible..."

Blood rushing to her head flushed her cheeks rosy and warm while, making a face as if she were getting to eat the chocolate of the century, soft and warm, her eyelids rising. You're amazing... but he couldn't say that, not at all.

"It reminds me of something I've missed... hey, our previous existence, have you thought about it? I have. I was the youngest novice sister in a monastery, and Tada-kun lived in the deep forest as a shepherd... that's what I believe. Every morning Tada-kun had to deliver cheese to us. Hey, isn't that incredibly romantic? Thank you, all my life I thank you, I'm thankful for this fate, that we've met this way twice now!"

"...Oo..."

Banri was filled with overflowing with a groan.

For some reason, somehow or other, this was way too much.

What about that excitement? This feeling of drama. Behaving like a foreigner. Let's be friends, she said, and in two days Kaga Kouko had gotten to this point.

And now Kouko was waiting for Banri's reaction. Eyes wide open, brilliantly sparkling, she silently gazed at her close friend Tada Banri.

What do I do, really—no, in truth. Not knowing what he should do, Banri for the moment, tried to put his hands to chest. Not Kouko's; to his own chest. And then, as if to be able to open his eyes the same way, he smiled with all his might, while gazing back at Kouko's sparkling eyes, trying to rock his head back and forth in the same way.

Apparently quite satisfied with how Banri was doing, Kouko, once more looking pleased, returned to swaying before him. Still without words, it was a little show of reflecting Xaviers, presented in male and female, so to speak.

Mitsuo exclaimed, "Scary...!", as if he could hardly stand it any longer, and covered his mouth with his hand. Banri only partially saw that he had jumped well back.

"Well, Mitsuo---"

Her swaying ceased, still standing before Banri's eyes, Kouko looked over towards Mitsuo.

As far as she was concerned, she loved Mitsuo. He was her formerly destined lover. From her point of view, though, he had separated himself from her destined scenario.

Banri unconsciously gasped.

What would come of Kouko's strange excitement in front of Mitsuo he could not tell. Facing him was her 'foreigner flavored suddenly fated friends mode', but... what should he do if she made a scene before Mitsuo? Carefully, he looked her over once more. For the time being, she didn't seem to be carrying any hidden weapons (not even a bouquet of roses).

She was wearing a white frilly blouse over a high-waisted, houndstooth checked one piece dress, black tights and black high-heeled, low rise boots. Because of the arrangement, changing immediately below the swell of her chest, it made her appear even more delicate and feminine. It was awfully nice to see.

Kouko turned about to face Mitsuo, the beautifully painted nails of the fingers of her left hand gently arranged, restraining the soft and full swelling out of the region of her heart.

"Mitsuo, you are just like a lonely hunter going out into the wilderness... your face seems like that..."

Eyes closed dreamily, she murmured softly and earnestly.

And then, her right hand extended elegantly, like a loving mother about to touch Mitsuo's cheek.

Mitsuo pulled back at once. Kouko quickly drew closer, touching his face against his will. Because of the power in those fingers, trying to hold down that body twisting in revulsion, from an outsider's point of view, it was becoming like an iron claw hold, but,

"To be sent to a monastery to quietly pray my days away, perhaps should have been my destiny from the start..."

"Hugugu..."

That was enough for Kouko, apparently.

Looking down upon the captured face of Mitsuo, her eyelids, light pearl cross-hatched by eye-shadow, glittered as she wore a dramatically tragic look.

From an onlooker's point of view, looking at how the two of them appeared, Banri instinctively gasped. Well, for sure... I'm glad it didn't come down to bloodshed.

All of which meaning, with the end of this performance of the Kaga Kouko Theater, would things be OK for the time being?

Though you dumped me, Mitsuo, and hurt me too, I am being healed by the presence of my wonderful friend! While recovering, I'm tough and beautiful! Thank you, everybody, for the help you've given me! I'm feeling fine! --- Such was the essence of Kouko's theater, and it was, well, amusing. But what exactly were her real motives, what did she see in Yana-ssan's face; he didn't feel like asking such unromantic questions right here, right now.

Matching up with the demise of Mitsuo and Kouko's one act, he realized that somebody was giving direction, "Music, start". Surely that was a voice from heaven, as if the stage director for this world were speaking, and,

"You are such a shock!"

Banri shouted with all his might.

Standing and facing Kouko and Mitsuo while walking slowly in a circle around them, assuming a pose, pointing his finger at them with a somehow evil face, as it were an emissary of the devil to liven up this ending. Nyahahahaha, nyahahahaahaa!

"You are such a shock!"

...In reality, he didn't know the lyrics very well. Derereredere, derereredereeredee, dereree... still, he used to know them! With the high-pitched voice he had held back, he would make their hair stand on end! Ready, set,

"In order to protect our love! You are taking off!"

"What!?"

The singing wasn't from Banri.

Surprised, he looked back. The stolen song's singing, five times higher than his limit, as high pitched as if he'd been impaled up his rear. He looked at the owner of that voice.

---He went as still as a stone.

"Soo, briiinngg back your looooveee~~~~~!"

What he had thought to be a voice from heaven, ...was very much so. But it wasn't. He had not heard a voice from heaven, nor a stage director's voice.

It was Linda.

Course registration forms rolled up to look like a microphone at her mouth, in a pose of leaning against the seat at the corner of the table, she sang hotly at the top of her voice, echoing still, her fist shoved in the air,

"...Haven't you taste in songs, Tada Banri?"

Those hands were saying "Hi!" to Banri.

"Linda---"

His voice shook, and though it could be heard, it sounded as if it were from somewhere far away, like the underworld.

Hurriedly, he added the honorific "senpai".

Yes, this is the person, he thought in his heart.

This was absolutely the person in that picture he found at home, clinging to him, carrying on with him. It was this face. This was Hayashida Nana. Her white skin, her eyes. Moreover, her age. Above all, her name. There was no mistaking it. There was a one in ten thousand chance, not quite an impossibility, but it wasn't very likely.

"Err... good morning. Something... if you look at the condition of the guy with you, Kaga-san, the image of 'Champion of the last Century' simply doesn't come to mind..."

Kouko tilted her head to one side, as if to say 'What are you doing?'

Banri nodded in greeting to Linda once more, in a underclassman-like way, while absolutely convinced that this person was the one in the picture.

Linda knew his past. They were connected. And yet, she was hiding the past. She was acting as if Banri's past did not exist.

What the heck, why?

Continuing her assault on him despite Banri's embarrassment, the back of the chair supporting her stiffly, Linda gave a big stretch. Her face was smooth, without makeup, probably not even eyebrow pencil. Getting up, a long-sleeved layered T-shirt covering half-way down her fingers, she crossed her blue-jeaned legs.

"Nooww, stop teasing your friends and come back here, Kouko-chan. If we hurry up, we'll get done before we run out of time. As for me, I plan on skipping second period anyway."

She turned to face Kouko, making the course registration forms flutter. Seeing that, Kouko hurriedly turned aside, returning to the sit at the table across from Linda.

"Sorry for making you wait, I'm working, I'm working, let's get down to writing!"

On top of the table, other than some cups of stuff to drink, there was a huge schedule table, the size of a tatami mat, and syllabus booklets that were distributed when they entered the school. Various kinds of writing implements were scattered upon it. Banri and Mitsuo noticed it, wondering what it was.

"We're discussing Kouko-chan's schedule right now."

Smiling slightly, Linda explained for them.

"This girl had no idea what were the required classes. Her schedule was ridiculous. She's taken no language class, and she hasn't bought her book. Now there's hardly any class with room to get in... yes, and yet this year she’s only taking about 24 credits. Not enough."

Kouko, her lips a little tighter, let out a sweet and innocently apologetic laugh and shrugged her shoulders.

"But, but if I did well, then I could take just language mid-year, and then I'd have all my required credits, right?"

"You should. Maybe."

"Then it's perfect!"

"Not quite perfect. ...About halfway there?"

"Halfway there! Hooray!"

What senpai suggested was good, of course, and Kouko looked over the "halfway done"

schedule form and gave a sigh. Finally, she scribbled something down on the registration forms with a silver ballpoint pen, and looked up with a sweet smile. Linda looked at it with a suddenly serious eye,

"What I mean is that lately, 'taking only 24 credits', isn't that rather dangerous? Getting thirty credits done wouldn't be awfully unusual! Aah, one more thing for later: you're going to want to get into some four credit course... Tada Banri, are you set? You've registered for your classes?"

Unexpectedly, she was trying to get Banri involved.

"Uh", mumbled Banri, momentarily at a loss for words,

"Well, for the time being, though my registration is already done, ...ah, but this guy keeps getting me into trouble during some wonderful lectures."

Casually, Kouko tried to close the distance, raising her hand to Mitsuo's elbow, bringing them closer to looking like a couple.

"I call this guy Yana-ssan. Yana-ssan, this is Linda-senpai of Omaken. We are greatly indebted to her, as she saved our lives, Kaga-san's and mine. I mentioned her before."

"Ah, yes, that time these guys were in trouble," Mitsuo said, giving a small nod to Linda while she glanced at him, Banri quietly keeping his mouth shut. Restlessly, he scratched near his nose.

This was not what he really wanted to talk about.

Mitsuo's classes didn't matter at all... no, nothing mattered. What he wanted to talk to Linda about was something else.

But frankly, how to do it?

'Why are you pretending not to know me? Linda-senpai, you really do know me, don't you? I saw you in the yearbook! In photos too. We were really close, weren't we? You know I'd lost my memories? Though I don't remember anything of those times, why is it you haven't said a thing? You and I, until I lost my memories, we had a special relationship, didn't we? I would like at least one thing from your mouth, a clear answer: yes or no. As it is, continuing to pretend not to know me, how am I going to settle my mind?'

---Trying to think, he looked about ready to break out laughing.

But he just couldn't say it.

Even if the two of them were alone in this place, he wondered if he could speak of this at all.

Even the matter of the yearbook and the photos, let alone asking about their shared past, where they were specially close, he thought. There was nothing to deny. The answer was 'yes'. There

was no other possibility.

And yet, Linda had to have some unknown reason for pretending to know nothing like this. Saying nothing to Banri, she was hiding something.

Banri was not so dimwitted as to repeat to himself over and over, "Hiding everything like that, why, why!? What should I do? Think, think!?", or maybe he was simpleminded. At least for now.

"Glad to meet you", good humouredly waving her hand, leaning against the back of her seat, Linda grinned at Mitsuo. "I'm Linda, Hayashida Linda", introducing herself with an air of long practice.

Looking at her, Banri thought once more, "She's a good senpai." Friendly enough to even put off going to her own lecture to counsel a younger student, even somebody she didn't know. Kind, and a person you really could rely on. Being together with her was fun, and he was thrilled just to be near her. ...So it was, until only a few days ago. Even if he didn't study it out, he thought that even now it should honestly be so.

At the present time, for sure, Linda didn't want to be known to my current self. Therefore, knowing the former Banri was not something that could be spoken of. Just that.

If he wanted to know more, perhaps, it wouldn't be bad to establish a good working relationship with the current Linda.

With respect to Banri, that--- yes. There was no hope. Having met Linda by chance as a club senior, he would make a good impression as junior. There was no way he would expose what she was hiding.

Above all, she seemed to be worried too. Perhaps, because of those worries, she chose to behave as if she didn't know the former Banri at all. He didn't feel like interrupting her with that conclusion, though. If he were told that what was there before him at that moment was important, he would also agree, he thought.

He really thought this to be so.

That was a confirmation of his identity, Banri decided.

Stop thinking about this already! Why should I, it's already over.

Forget about it. ---Yes, I've forgotten.

With a chuckle, Banri lifted his face, deliberately like a junior, like an idiot.

"I mean, Linda-senpai, this guy Yana-ssan, he's taking Wednesday 5th period Civil Law class~, could you please tell him something about it~?"

He was trying to speak to Linda sweetly.

"Huh!? Seriously!? Tsukamoto's Civil Law class!? Why something so crazy!?"

Linda frowned, and covered her mouth with her hand as if in shock. Are you trying to torture yourself, my dear? This, too, seeming but a momentary play, she said to Banri, "I'm not making fun of you!", and like a female soldier, she quickly put on a straight face.

"Eh... What's the terrible thing I'm doing?"

"No no no, it's horrible! It's always bad, you, err, Yana-ssan? Because that is truly awful. "Wednesday's fifth period 'Civil Law 1' every year has a seriously difficult test, with past year's notes and references not allowed, less than seventy percent on the test and less than seventy percent attendance (no use in arguing) is failure, and because there aren't many people, answering the roll call for somebody else is impossible... for Civil Law most wait, and furthermore, if you don't study seriously... no, they say that even working diligently, it's quite hard."

"Are you serious?"

"That's why everybody takes Monday's second period Civil Law!"

"...Is, that so..., ah... seems I messed up... What to do, this is really awful... Am I already repeating something next year...?"

"Though it's OK to repeat it. Monday second period's easy Civil Law class is most people's preference, though how many people waited, and then fell in the trap of taking the demon of Wednesday 5th period again, who knows..."

From what Linda had to say, Mitsuo was getting quite worried. Watching this from the side, Kouko casually cleaned off her pen nibs.

"Aah ah ah, Mitsuo, what kind of mess is this? Ah good, I have the perfect schedule set up for me. I've even taken Civil Law perfectly."

Even at other people’s problems, her face smiled beautifully. While her pretty nails glittered, she went cleaning up her writing implements.

Openly hostile, Mitsuo glared at Kouko. Kouko was completely unperturbed. On the contrary, smiling, she looked straight back at Mitsuo's face, cheerfully adding on "sorry to hear that", and whether on purpose or not, humming in good humor.

While Mitsuo was practically trembling all over, he slowly looked over at Banri's face,

"...Banri, come with me a bit!"

"W, where to!? And mess up Kaga-san's studies!? Hey, be careful! Mother Bear has cubs in the spring, and could get rather irritated!"

"You got it wrong! What I'm doing now is going to second period Civil Law! Anyway, I'm going to catch the professor when he leaves the lecture, and ask him if I can take it from now on, though I haven't attended even once yet! I'm throwing away 4500 yen!"

"Ah, ahh, that's good, that's good! Good luck, Yana-ssan! Hurry up!"

"Oh!"

He took off running, but Mitsuo, looking like he'd forgotten something, suddenly stumbled a step or two and came back to them,

"Idiot! You'll lose the credit entirely! You'll have to do it over! And then you'll cry!"

With an awfully sudden jerk of his chin, both his arms flapping like gull's wings, he let out a stream of abuse directed at Kouko. And then he took off running again. This time, he flew directly out of the cafeteria, and could be seen using his long legs freely to run up the staircase.

While she watched, Kouko laughed rather scornfully and coldly.

"What was that? Did you see? Mitsuo's a child. He cannot have friends, so he goes it alone."

"...Ka, Kaga-san"

"Whaat? Tada-kun."

As far as Banri was concerned, she appeared a friend to the last. Smiling at him, she tilted her head to the side quizzically.

"Welll, aren't you being a little too rough on Yana-ssan...?"

"Rough? Me? No such thing; we're normally like that."

"No, what if the nun treated the woodland hunter like that..."

"But he's not just an acquaintance."

"Eh! ...W, what're you saying...? Weren't you childhood friends! That's scary!"

"No. I didn't know him in a previous life."

"We're talking about this life! I mean, just a minute, seriously, with what kind of history can you be like this? Not long ago you were glued to Yana-ssan's face, dreamily muttering 'Mitsuo...'!"

"That was the last act of our play, Mitsuo and I. To the music of Tada-kun and Linda-senpai's

wild orchestra, the curtain descended. With that, our relationship is already over. Therefore, he is somebody that I do not know."

Kouko declared this very coldly and without hesitation, her beautiful lips formed into a prickly pout, her slender chin upraised. Without so much as a twitch of her eyebrows, that kind of coldness. "Eh", his speech cut off, Banri too fell into silence.

Well, Banri had been thinking for a while now, "these guys' relationship isn't very good..." Mitsuo avoided hating Kouko, though while Kouko chased after him in love, he wasn't nice to her at all, if they met up they only fought, to all appearances they were abusive to each other. It looked like there wasn't even a memory of the two of them having been friends.

And yet, because he knew of Kouko's awkwardness, Banri saw the two of them as something different. Because Kouko truly loved Mitsuo, he had grown used to it. Put simply, it was excessively ‘tsun' in the ‘tsundere' aspect of their relationship. Precisely because he understood that, it didn't set his teeth on edge thinking about it. Though he liked Kouko, Banri also softheartedly worried about her.

In the end, after ten years (more or less) that Kaga Kouko and Yanagisawa Mitsuo had been childhood friends, she had been dumped once and for all. Was all they had left simply the sheer seriousness of it all?

What an empty relationship they had. In any case, though confirmed as friends with each of them separately, it was little comfort to Banri. But thinking on what was before him now, he let out an unconscious sigh.

Linda stretched as she stood up.

"Well then, I have to go to a lecture too. Are you two all right now? Is there anything else you want to ask me?"

Kouko stood respectfully for Linda, also acting the part of junior,

"We're good, thank you very much. Thank you for having helped us. Next time for sure, allow us to do something for you."

With the slow pace of a true princess, she bowed her head. Linda waved her hand and smiled as if she were embarrassed.

"Don't worry about it. It wouldn't bother me if you came out to the club, and if you were to practice hard, I'd be really happy. That said, it's tomorrow mid-day, OK? We'll meet at eleven, have lunch while we meet, and practice starts at one o'clock. So don't be late."

Pointing at Banri with a slender finger,

"You too, Tada Banri! Practice. Awa Odori. The same place as before. You haven't forgotten?"

"Ah, of course not! Yes sir!"

"Yes, good answer. Tomorrow then. Don't miss it, because it looks like some of the fourth year senpais are going to be there."

Linda hung her bag from her shoulder, stepping away from the table easily. As she walked away, not a sound arose from her vividly fluorescent Nikes.

That reminds me, seeing Linda off with a smile, he looked at Kouko's face.

"Were you bothered about staying with Omaken?"

Certainly coming back from the previous practice session, Kouko seemed to have lost a lot of her enthusiasm. It seemed to him that she'd said things about how embarrassed she was by her awkward dancing, and that there was no way, she could not stay in the club.

"That's right. I did."

Nodding her head deeply, Kouko looked back at Banri intensely.

"Lately, I've had various things too... didn't you? I've overcome them, and now I, I'm really looking forward to things."

Her smile sparkled brightly. Her pure white teeth showed through. She carried herself like royalty. Banri even reflexively wanted to applaud.

"That so? Good."

"...You really think it's good?"

"Yes, I do! I would be happy to be able to dance the Awa Odori with Kaga-san, nothing would be better! To me, running into difficulties is part of growing up."

Her body twisting, Kouko slowly closed her eyes, as if she were drunk.

"Thank you for the support. As for me, anyway, I'm thinking of taking on a new challenge. Even Awa Odori is one! Hesitating like this is wrong. Thinking about this and that, being scared is wrong. I believe living that way is a waste. Every day, we must progress... right?"

Her eyes flicking open, she looked at Banri. Banri nodded to her,

"Right!"

Her large eyes sparkled to the point of being dangerous.

And then coming several steps closer, suddenly a few inches from Banri's nose Kouko became

serious. Banri gulped reflexively; Kouko could not be stopped.

"Advancing day by day! And then earnestly forward! Forward! Forward! One way or the other, forward, progressing! That will be my life! To go forward living like that, that is what I have decided! It will be a super proactive life, on the GO! I will see it accomplished perfectly! Advancing, continuing forward until I die! I will do it, absolutely! Becoming perfect, going through life, looking forward positively, even unto death!"

She caught Banri by the shoulder. *Comrade!* With that kind of energy.

Having gotten to this point, Banri averted his eyes at once.

He laughed uneasily.

Saying only that much, he retreated backwards. Her hand leaving his shoulder, "What?", Kouko's lips looked displeased, but no. The feeling was distinctly that of fear. Why does this person run to such extremes?

Though she'd dumped him, she was looking towards the future. That so? She'll even go to the club! Wow, that's good! ...To the extent she settles down to normality, it'll be easier to get to know her. And it somehow seemed that in her previous existence she didn't even know Mitsuo, her good friend up til now. Why would one have to suddenly jump so far, to the point this person in particular has gone?

He said to himself, "Oh well, she cannot moderate herself precisely because she is Kaga Kouko", though he also cared for her.

One cheek puffed out extremely cutely, Kouko spoke to the drawn-back Banri.

"Tada-kun, since we've come to be true friends, if we have anything we want to talk about, could we just talk? Let's not keep secrets!"

"Well, though you say it... what's that tension, that fear as if of that group of the 'Crystal God'... really Kaga-san, wasn't it you who said carelessly, in shock from a broken heart, 'Hello Neo-Children?'"

Kouko, who had just promised that he could say whatever he wanted to, suddenly, as if she were saying "hold it!", her eyebrows rose into beautiful arcs. Yes, she's angryyy. One serving of anger. Anger, coming right uuup.

"What are you saying! That cannot be! This a universal question of living as a human being. I don't want to be trivialized like that!"

As you might expect, seeing that beautiful, magnificently ordered, showy face with an expression brightly flushed in anger, was rather terrifying.

"Ah, whoa...!"

Banri, falling down before her as if she were a Heian-era princess,

"No 'Whoa's!"

With a snap, a finger thrust out towards his nose, and once more he threw his head back sharply. It had nearly gone up his nose to the second joint.

"In other words, Tada-kun should move forward too! No, not doing so is wrong! Do it! Now! Right away! As best friends, it wouldn't be right if we didn't move forward in about the same way! Because if I couldn't do so, I couldn't be a perfect friend!"

"Eh... no way..."

"Look here, again a voice like that! What a weak looking mess! 'Whoa~' 'No way~' Talking like that isn't allowed! Making such a dumb face isn't either! Yes, even though I was,"

'Even though I dumped you', hesitating like that is no good!

---Whether in fact, or in saying so, he thought.

Now even Banri, suddenly realizing the gap in space and time between the two of them, looked back at Kouko as if through distorted memories. Noticing that look,

"..."

Even the energetically yapping Kouko's vocal cords suddenly fell silent, as if broken.

Staying this way, both of them silent, "..." (Do you usually speak like this!?) "..." (I didn't say anything, nothing at all!) "..." (But how about trying to talk!?) "..." (I'm not doing anything, really I'm not.) "..." (If that's the case, then put that awkward pantomime of yours in order!) "..." (I understand, that's the funny part.) "..." (We've done something right!) ---up to this point communicating well by gaze and by gesture,

"...A, anyhow! It's because it's like that! ...It's like that! In short, let's give it our best with Omaken, Tada-kun and I! ...That... was what I had to say."

Kouko put her smile in place. Well then, Banri relaxed too. For now, whatever he'd forgotten didn't matter.

"Well, look, we're not just first years, are we? Fo, forward! Powerfully! Full throttle! Bet your life! With all one's might! Let's try hard! Life is not to be wasted! Right, that's the way it is!"

Searching for approval, his fist clenched, Banri answered only with a sigh, but in her own way Kouko took the meaning to be 'yes'.

"Right!"

Taking a breath as if a bit relieved, she suddenly turned and easily grabbed her brand-name bag from the seat where she had left it.

Hanging it from her shoulder by its strap she turned around, her glossy hair in thick curls brushed over her left shoulder. Smiling still, revealing her sparkling white teeth, she showed only the right side of her neck to Banri.

That standing figure, a gorgeous beauty. A woman just like from the movies, or a tele-drama, having lept from the world of fiction, she was like everybody's dreams, brought to life.

Kouko was perfect, of course. Once more easily captivated, Banri thought. ---At least, with regards to outward appearances, nothing but 'perfect' came to mind.

If she were to open her mouth, somehow subtly defenseless, but she only seemed to require a bit of touch-up here and there, her appearance truly beautiful, and blessed to sparkle all the time. Because they were friends, he could not talk about things like 'appearances only'.

And then, bringing together the heels of her booties, with a smile she flickered her long eyelashes.

"Hey, Tada-kun, are you free now? Won't you go with me to the student affairs office? Since schedules are coming out, I'd like somebody with me."

Kouko spoke as if she had rehearsed it. Even as a friend, was it natural to invite somebody in such a way? And she added a wink from her big eyes.

Mitsuo was running late to Civil Law while he was skipping, Banri thought, but,

"Then, afterwards let's go to Civil Law. That OK with you?"

Having been told like that, how dared he refuse? What to do? My friend, fated from a previous existence to go out with me, has invited me. What's more, my friend is a beauty to die for.

Hmph, though I was dumped the day before yesterday.

* * *

Side by side, Banri and Kouko left the cafeteria, walking towards the student affairs office, which was on another floor.

Looking out the windows from the dark, old school building, it was dazzlingly bright.

Perhaps because the weather was nice today, there already being signs of summer, there were mingled here and there amongst the students going back and forth a few wearing short-sleeve shirts.

Banri, wearing a T-shirt and jeans, and a hoodie with "The Clumsy Student" across the back, was getting a little warm, and removed the hoodie as he walked. Rolling up the slightly sweaty, ratty feeling thing, he tried to force it into the bag. However, he was unable to stuff it in very well because of what was already there, and continuing up the stairs to the landing, he slowly came to halt in the narrow corridor.

"Are you OK? Could I carry something?"

Realizing that Kouko was reaching out to him,

"No, no, I wouldn’t make you carry my stuff..."

Trying to refuse, he had realized that his shoelaces had come untied. Oh well, but there was nothing that could be done about it: he was a sloppy kid.

"Well, sorry to have to ask, but could you hold this for a moment?"

Having Kouko hold the hoodie he'd taken off for a moment (and praying to God it didn't smell of sweat), and crouching down by the wall, he first retied his shoes. So as not to block traffic, Kouko also moved to the side of the corridor, at Banri's side.

Seen close up, Kouko, who was waiting, holding Banri's hoodie reverently, as if it were something important, had really slim legs, of course. The line of her calves elegantly refined, was like a work of art. Such ankles: if you were to use any force, they'd snap. Above the knees too she was shapely, no extra flesh sagging... No, he wasn't planning to look, but there she was, right next to his face. If you're trying to cross the street, you look to see if there are cars coming, anybody would look over there. It was that kind of thing.

He glanced sideways, wearing a serious glare as he sighed, thinking, "Wearing heavy black tights in the mid-winter is fine, but isn't that too hot in this climate? Does hot or cold even matter to this person, if it's stylish?"

Then, Kouko was moving those slim legs uncomfortably.

"...Ta, Tada-kun, by any chance, are you looking at my legs?"

"I'm not looking, I'm not looking."

While Banri answered back clearly,

"Though I'm not looking, Kaga-san, aren't those black things hot? Doesn't it seem like 'coordinating the coordinates'?"

He tried to ask here plainly. Was it common for a guy to recognize the subtleties of girl's fashion? Uh oh, he could not say no. That much, Banri already knew from the internet.

"My, my tights?"

Kouko looked back at the Banri's upturned face for just an instant, her expression complex.

"This... though it's a bit hot, in truth there are reasons I don't take them off."

She answered like that. Banri got back up,

"Of course, girls have their reasons..."

In one motion, he stuck his hand deep into his bag. For now, in order to stuff his hoodie in there, he wanted to turn all his fallen textbooks sideways.

"We sure do! We have many concerns. Actually, it was swallowed by a snake."

"Ehh, that's awful!"

Thinking he wanted to make Kouko laugh again by saying some ridiculous joke, or lightening things with a smile, Banri went to take back his possibly sweaty hoodie, looking over towards Kouko.

However,

"It was yesterday, in our garden. It was the worst of luck. I'm wearing tights to cover up the damage. As a girl, of course, I don't want to show such things."

Kouko was saying it with a straight face.

No way... this wasn't a joke, was it?

"...Wh, what? Swallowed by a snake...? Kaga-san...?"

"Yes. And what a shock it was!"

No surprise, that.

Banri, forgetting about rearranging his bag, looked back at Kouko's beautiful white face, picturing it in his mind. While she screamed, Kaga Kouko was slowly being swallowed by a big snake, feet first. In the garden. The snake's stomach gradually swelling, her shape could not be seen, losing form as it was digested... Yet the next day, Kaga Kouko came to college, saying

"Forward! Awa Odori!" and such.

Wasn't that enough "problems"?

Getting dizzy, Banri shook his head, and took a deep breath. Getting plenty of oxygen to his brain, he miraculously got things in order.

"Err... just in case though, how far were you swallowed...?"

"'Up to where', eh?"

Kouko blinked from Banri's question, and then,

"Enough, you're joking...! Wow you're funny! Tada-kun, you dummy, aha! It was nothing but a joke! Ahahahaha!"

She suddenly broke out in happy sounding laughter. Surely thinking something like "Eh, what a crazy kid..." about Banri, she covered her mouth with her hand, but she seemed unable to contain her laughter, her cheeks gradually going deep red, laughing still as her body doubled over as if in pain, hugging the hoodie she held in her hands tightly.

"'Sw, swallowed', but not vertically! Stop it already, Tada-kun, you're too funny! Like this, this! Swallowed sideways! 'Up to where'!? Did you think I'd been slowly swallowed from my feet to my head!? There aren't such snakes! In Tokyo!? In my back yard!? Probably not even in the jungle, where in the world did you get that idea!? Really, you are really too funny, I've decided that! Sideways it was, sideways sideways, sideways swallowed!"

With his left wrist representing her foot, and his right hand the snake's head, he mimed how it might bite from the side.

"No no no", Banri replied calmly back to the princess lost in laughter.

"...Then, you weren't 'swallowed', but rather 'bitten'...? What, you thought 'let's be funny', and made a mystery to solve? Were you inventing something like that?"

"No, you're wrong! Swallowed is the right word! Because while it was trying to bite, it was trying to suck the flesh of my calf into it's throat! It was sucking really hard! Like this!? Such a snake in my back yard!"

Suddenly Kouko, moving her hands as if she were a udon noodle maker, tossed Banri's hoodie into the air, stretching it out long and thin. "M, my hoodie", Banri moaned,

"Give it to me! Because,"

She grabbed the hood part and spun it around. Then, winding it around his neck,

"'Kyaa! It hu-hu-hu-hurts!', she said!"

"But I wasn't kidding!"

"Then how are you alive and kicking so energetically!?"

"It wasn't at my neck! It was Bibinba's neck!"

"Bibinbaa!? ...You mean... that star in Kinnikuman!?"

"What're you talking about! Here on Earth! I mean a cat! Shizuka's cat!"

"Oh, I see... no, but aren't you changing the tone of the story!? Where the name comes from, or is it from the Kamei family... is it that Shizuka!? Why didn't you tell me clearly from the start!?"

"Neither! My lit-tle bro-ther! My little brother Kaga Shizukaa! He's a chubby little thing! ...Or rather, OK, I can't be talking that way. So you understand this better, listen, he's my little brother. Are you good to this point? He's called Shizuka. That good too? Good, right? He keeps cats. Bibinba's one of them. He's a Himalayan. Yesterday, he was attacked by a snake in the garden, and he was strangled. It had already gotten to be twice around, no, about three times around. It was completely there, all set to enjoy it's meal! So I was already in a panic, anyway I jumped at it, like this,"

Kouko grabbed the hoodie wound around his neck with both hands, pulling him towards her.

"'Ughh! Let go of Bibinba! Urgghhh...!' ...Uh, that must hurt..."

"Ooou... ouou... or rather do you need it so tight..."

"But, if it was like that... and it was! It was like that!"

Grabbing one sleeve of the hoodie and slowly unwinding it from his neck, she started to swing it around, much like a cowboy. The other students passing by avoided it, treating it as an annoyance.

"I used centrifugal force! And then, I did like this!"

Her hair flying, Kouko swung it widely, and the hoodie struck the wall. Though for sure it was once Banri's, the dead hoodie, it’s power lost, slithered to the floor.

"Thinking, 'Phew... I did it...!', I turned my back on it to go in the house and get a garbage bag. If I had done that...!"

Kouko crouched down for some reason, grabbed the sleeve of the hoodie, and reached down to touch behind the calf of her leg,

"I screamed 'Kyaa!' It was like this, like this! Shouting 'It bit me!', and 'Kyaa!', even kicking my feet it didn't let go, swallowing me little by little, it was already a disaster! I was getting more and more in a panic!"

"...Aw, awfully so...! So just what did you do, in the end?"

" 'Get it over with!' "

Cutting off any more useless questions, in a very unladylike fashion, she hit near the hoodie's sleeve cuff, as if she were giving the snake's head a karate chop. Like a head stuck in a guillotine, it looked dead. If it had been a Green General, it's goose would have been cooked.

"Oh..."

Somehow feeling for the snake, Banri held his own neck. In the 'Naked Terminator Pose', Kouko briefly basked in the afterglow of victory.

"...You know, that looks pretty bad. Tada-kun's hoodie has gotten all beaten up...!"

Realizing it, she picked up the hoodie's corpse.

"No way, I'm sorry! Silly me, I'd gotten lost in the conversation!"

"Don't worry about it, it was already that way to begin with."

"There's no reason! Enough already, what am I going to do? I'm going to get it cleaned!"

"That's OK, really, I do my laundry. I mean, it's only old UNIQLO stuff anyhow. It was sacrificed, but it was a really good story, worth listening to, I think."

Taking the hoodie back from the apologetic, blushing Kouko, and having said nothing about reimbursement, or any such thing, he stuffed it quickly into the bag in front of him.

"No, it was worth listening to, really... Kaga-san does it all the time, getting rid of snakes."

"No way! That was the first time in my life I've touched a snake!"

"Was Bibinba OK after all that?"

"He almost jumped into the washing machine from the mental shock, even this morning he nearly didn't leave it."

"Drum type?"

"Yes, the normal vertical type. ...Ah, enough already of me, now, I was gibbering from the tension..."

No, your tension from the start was incredible. The which, well, he didn't say.

Kouko, blushed as if she were finally embarrassed, covering her face with both hands like a little girl, looking around nervously. "Eighteen year old snake killer Kaga Kouko-chan..." muttered Banri, and Kouko raised her fist like a little kid, as if to hit Banri.

"Enough already! Forget about it!"

"In spite of it all, you've been chatting with me in high spirits."

"Be, because! Am I right? Isn't this topic something else? Didn't a snake came out, attack our cat, and my life was put at risk, ambushed from behind? In the back yard? Isn't this kind of thing rare? ...Over there, it doesn't happen, does it? In Shizuoka?"

"No way. Shizuoka is a big city."

He'd seen snakes run over by machines in the tea fields, but how could he say it? His grandfather on his father's side collected mamushi around there to pickle them in sake (the trauma: saying things like "if you drink it, your memories'll come back~" to get him to drink it), but those were only minor details.

"For sure. And so I already, since yesterday, was talking to anybody, talking and not stopping, thinking, 'I can talk!' I had already taken it to the limit."

"But you know, it would have been good of you to send me an e-mail about it."

That, it was only for a moment.

Even this didn't matter, being the continuation of a joking conversation.

It wouldn't have been all that strange if he had missed in the dimness, for only just a moment, Kouko's eyes trembling forlornly.

Banri had spotted it.

To a person just dumped, sending an e-mail about such things wasn't enough. ---To Banri, it seemed as if Kouko's very heart were speaking these things.

You don't have to speak of fated friends, forward looking lives and such in a state of high drama. Anybody can do so. Anybody doing so is not making unpleasant decisions. Therefore, doing so, she wasn't forced to get on with her abandoned scenario. Though she knew it was strange for her, it wasn't like there was no other way.

Because, it isn't so, and I don't have to...

That was what Banri heard.

"...So this morning, I thought, 'Let's go talk to Linda-senpai!' "

Suddenly, Kouko broke out with a smile like a flower blooming.

"But, senpai, when she got to looking at my schedule, she let out a big sigh and set to thinking. This is awful, she said. Already, I couldn't just say something like 'Yesterday a mouthful of my backside was being swallowed by a snake, you see' "

Laugh, Tada-kun.

So it seemed Kouko was asking him.

"No way, I wouldn't say anything either! Not at all!"

Banri laughed too.

He didn't see anything else. Pretending not to notice, he laughed merrily while he thought some more. It seemed that Kouko didn't have any friends to casually talk about everyday things with.

As far as she was concerned, now, she had lost her whole world: Mitsuo. Already, in Kouko's world, even the ordinary things people could do to casually keep in touch had become unsatisfactory.

"But, that's fine. I was able to speak with you. ...And it seems you understood me?"

Gently softening her smile and dropping her gaze a little, Kouko murmured in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

It seemed the demon of her nerves had fallen at last. From the chuckle that issued from her lips, to her swelled chest, even Banri saw and understood it all, breathed in deeply, and let it out. She seemed to recover, little by little, her mental stability, and apparently self-conscious about how difficult she had been to handle, going to extremes as she had,

"...I'm such a mess..."

Shrugging her shoulders, she gave a wry smile. I'm, such a mess. Aren't I? And so on.

Kouko had had enough of it too.

She understood, and her chest rose.

Very much so. To be able to regain her footing in only two days was nothing to sneeze at. She wasn't that clever a person.

Hardly two days had passed today, and Kouko, as she was, just herself, wasn't good at facing Mitsuo who had dumped her, and Banri whom she had dumped. For that reason, she couldn't be

jumping here and there absurdly in her normal fashion. In order to not show a downcast or hurt face, she had to play her part. Unable to speak as a clever person would, it probably wasn't easy.

There was nothing that could be done. He felt as if his heart were being squeezed.

The more he thought about Kouko's feelings, the more painful they were. In general, Banri's convenient imagination was convinced perhaps, but, he thought that in Kouko's heart, standing next to him, was an unstoppable force of will.

After all, of course, he loved Kouko. The more he thought of it, the more he wished to get closer to her heart. Stubbornly, in spite of having been dumped, he wanted to be her helper, at least.

For the first time, Banri thought it would be good to become a part of Kouko's scenario. No, he wanted to be, even.

Now appearing on stage, Tada Banri. As Mitsuo's friend, Kouko's friend. Various things have happened, but he was now the understanding and fated friend of Kouko. Am I allowed to take on such a role? ...It's all right if I'm not your boyfriend. In Kouko's lonely world, if such as I is acceptable, I'd like to be on stage. If there is room on this stage, I would like to stay a long time.

And then I pray, that eventually many players on her stage may appear, brightly colored, sparkling for moment spinning.

He believed this from the bottom of his heart. It was the first time he had harbored such tender feelings for another person. At least, as far as Banri himself could remember.

Prompting each other, "Shall we go?", their exchanged glances were pure friendship.

It seemed they had truly established a relationship as close friends, Banri staying beside Kouko, Kouko also, seemingly relieved, smiling quietly. And then, at that moment, as they both slowly opened their mouths, about to start talking about something,

"Morn-ning Banri!"

Thump, he was struck lightly in the middle of his back.

He looked back.

There was nobody there.

"Wait, wait, where are you looking?"

No, now he understood--- there was no way he could fail to.

That voice. There was just no mistaking it. Her voice was over the top, excessively girly, saccharine sweet, like from an anime show. On top of that, for some reason she was addressing him without honorifics.

From about than a foot lower than his, her little face was laughing.

Incredibly, she was eighteen years old. A micro-sized pet fairy. Even Mr. Two Dimensions approved of her as a multi-dimensional life-form. Such...

"O, Oka-chan..."

...a thing, Oka Chinami was.

* * *

Thinking, "What should I do?", he suddenly felt an alarming aura prickling over the right side of his body, coming from around Kouko.

As far as Kouko was concerned, Chinami, clearly, was the enemy. Undoubtedly, she was thinking something like "The thieving cat who stole my beloved Mitsuo!",

"Mornin' to you too, Kaga-san! Wow, your clothes are really pretty again today. I knew it, from a distance, I said to myself, 'That's Kaga-san!' "

Though Chinami was innocently jumping around, Banri remembered the danger she was in and gasped. Why Oka-chan, why are you acting like that, off guard in front of Kouko? Shouldn't you be careful of those fingernails? The person before you is the snake killer Kaga Kouko!

"...Okachi, nami..."

Kouko slowly turned around, looking down at Chinami, muttering with an expression like Cleopatra's, tasting poison.

"Ahaha, you got the break wrong~! It's not Okachi, but rather Oka, Chinami!"

Then why so off guard! Banri casually put his foot out to the side, try to insert himself halfway into the space between Kouko and Chinami.

Chinami was innocent to the point of being dangerous to herself, and again, as always, she was cute enough to die for. Her long eyelashes and round, cute eyes prominent, her features were pure, like a foreigner-child. Tied into a large knot, her hair was full and dark. Her slender body covered by a deep blue dress worn over blue denims, her slim ankles peeked out. On solid, light

brown leather sandals, already wearing her trademark rugged day-pack, while to Banri who, as usual (as a male), did not understand attire all that well, Chinami truly exuded the presence of a fairy princess coming to them from the forest.

Banri could not stand it any longer.

"...Oka-chan...!"

"Whaat?"

"Uaa~~~!"

His body was swaying, wobbling. Don't breathe such air! It's contaminated here! Return to your forest! He couldn't help but want to cry out. But her cuteness filled the limits of the universe. The cell phone in her hand had a really flashy strap, including even an Indian feather decoration, delicately cute, and already, he couldn't help but be dumbfounded. Even her hairpin was somehow cute! It's not possible to be so cute.

"What was that about already? Banri, what've you done?"

"It doesn't matter one way or the other!"

"What the heck?"

You're the one I should be saying that to, what's with that, that "Nyaha!", way of laughing!

No, but---

"..."

Kouko was watching.

With a hard yet beautiful face, like that of a statue of a goddess, unsmiling, chin pulled back, she was slowly and quietly looking over Banri's agony, and then the transcendentally cute Oka Chinami.

As if he'd remembered, "So it is, your place is by my side, minion...", Banri dejectedly and quietly returned to Kouko's side. If Kouko was the evil queen, then Banri was her attending servant. Her Boyacky, so to speak.

Not even glancing back at the servant that had returned to her, Kouko, her expression unchanged, continued to look down upon Chinami. Between the high-heeled Kouko and the flat-sandaled Chinami, there was all of six inches of difference in height.

And so, after a little while,

"...Why?"

Her rose colored lips in a haughty queen-like smile, Kouko opened her mouth.

"Hm? You asked, 'Why?' "

Eyes round in puzzlement, Chinami asked back, "Eh?" Much like a squirrel, asking "Who's eaten the walnut I hid beneath the dead leaves?" ...that kind of feeling.

Irritated, Kouko's aura flickered. Her attending servant Banri understood.

"Though I don't expect to hear anything, I'm listening. I have an ooo-pen mind. I do! My humanity is noble, so while you admire my perfection, answer me quickly. Answer in two seconds. Twoo, oonnee,"

"Eh? Two seconds? Hm? 'Humanity'?"

"You're disqualified, dullard! Begone!"

Gruffly and jealously waving her hand, Kouko averted her face in irritation.

"Well then! We've got things to do!"

Chinami wasn't at all defeated. Slapping her stomach like a sea otter hitting a shellfish,

"You see, I wanted to hear about your schedules, Banri and Kaga-san."

On her smooth cheeks, dimples stood out clearly. Chinami smiled happily while Banri and Kouko looked at each other. Sparkling to the point you could almost hear it, those cheerful eyes frankly shone. For some reason or other, Banri and Kouko wordlessly exchanged glances. When their gazes met, he felt he heard a nod... he wanted to think it was his imagination.

"All I wanted to ask was, wouldn't you like to do a drinking party? I was thinking, let's invite you! Hey, look, didn't we talk about it before? We talked about having a party of people with two-syllable last names. Well, it would be called a gathering of people with two-syllable surnames for the time being. I was thinking I wanted to have a drinking party for just the first-years. I was the first to say something, so I'm the organizer. This week or next, wherever, I've planned for a budget of about 3000 yen. If there's any day that doesn't work because of part time jobs or whatever, we can adjust a bit too. What would be good for you two?"

"A drinking party!?"

Having heard such cheery talk, Banri of course,

"I'll go! Of course I'll go, whenever it is? Thanks for the invitation!"

In good spirits, he couldn't help but raise his hand. What's more, with that hand,

"Isn't that great, Kaga-san!"

Much too familiarly, he clapped his hand on the evil queen's shoulder. Kouko's temples twitched.

"...For now I hear you. ...What's with this?"

"Eh, saying 'what's with this' like that? Weren't you invited too! Speaking of which, isn't this the first time you've truly been invited to anything apart from a religion? Of course we're going to take part, you're moving forward positively in life! Oka-chan, Kaga-san has nothing on her schedule, she's basically free, so it's OK! Ah, and I've got spare time too! Cool!"

"Waah! That's great!", Chinami gave a little jump, taking Banri's hand in high spirits, "It's going to be fun~!"

"I, am, not, going."

At Kouko's eerily low utterance, the two of them stopped jumping around.

"I wouldn't go to such a thing. Frankly, I don't feel like getting mixed up with Oka Chinami, not even one micron. If I wanted to waste time like that, it'd be better for me to go dig a hole in the garden! And then, you know what I would do with that hole? I'd fill it up! As if it'd never been dug! I'd be busy! Digging up, filling in, digging up, filling in, digging up, digging up, filling in! Oh what a mess, really busy! Busy running around! That's about what my schedule looks like!"

She directed those last stinging words, somehow, at Banri too.

"Besides, that's right, I've got to go to the Student Affairs Office. By myself."

And then Kouko, giving a smile without heart, turned her back on Banri and Chinami and walked away, by herself.

"Ah, hold on, wait! You said we were going together!"

Banri, the sorrowful minion, ran after her back, confused.

But Kouko didn't wait for Banri. Her heels clacking unexpectedly loudly and quickly, in the crowd of students Banri lost sight of her back.

"...Huh?"

Looking around the area for a bit, Banri scratched his head. Was she angered by something insensitive he'd said? Did she hate him? He tried to run further after her, but by force of will he stopped himself.

Perhaps he had been too caught up in the moment, thinking they were somehow understanding each other. With the situation as it was, it looked like even running up to the Student Affairs, catching up with Kouko in her current state, probably wouldn't turn out well. Above all, for the time being certainly, his stubbornly running after her would be annoying.

Chinami followed along behind Banri too, looking around for Kouko the same way as they talked.

"Did Kouko-san get mad? Would it do any good to send her a text?"

"Yeah..."

She opened up her cell phone right then and there, but, changed her mind and stopped. She didn't want to annoy her in her impatience. As yet, it seemed to him that Kouko herself, the stubborn girl, did want to understand her feelings. For now, if they sent texts or called, they'd just be "dropped".

For now, he took a deep breath. He told himself, have patience, have patience. If she was a friend, then left alone for a bit, then once she'd calmed down she'd get back in touch. She should.

Without having called, Chinami faced Banri, took a little breath and spoke disappointedly.

"As for me, though I wanted even Kaga-san to come to the drinking party... It was no good, I guess."

"...Err, Oka-chan"

"Hmm?", her eyes blinking innocently, Chinami looked up at Banri. This was his chance, for sure. There were some things he wanted to ask her.

"Kaga-san has a bad attitude towards you. Well, though she's not a bad person, and for the time being I will stand up for her, could you not get angry or annoyed at that? Though I would think that if she talked like that all the time, she would lose out on invitations to parties."

"Does it seem like it?"

"No, but... hey, by chance, are you really so black-hearted after all? Do you have some sort of terrible plot under all this, trying to lure the girl you cannot stand? Into the deeps of the Oka-chan jungle to be entombed there, to be slurped up and swallowed by the dark Oka-ffleshia, chewing up and spitting out nothing but bones? Were you thinking something like that? Are you getting ready, opening up your petals as if licking your chops?"

Even though he could understand, Banri was stringing together rude words out of frustration, but,

"Wha, what the... what kind of creature am I?"

Making eyes truly innocent looking, but seeming a little worried, she bent her head to one side, looking doubtful. If she'd had big rabbit ears, standing up, their tips, perhaps, would be trembling.

"I am inviting her simply because I want to invite her!"

"Wait a sec~, already you've said, 'Eh? The flower below me? Am I a perverted carnivorous flower!? Hmph!', like that."

"I, I didn't say anything about any flower below... Really, I want to invite Kaga-san too. I find myself rather strongly captivated by her, you see. Whatever she says, whatever she does, I feel I want to watch. She has caught my interest. This, though it seems there are so many people out there. Besides, she's super~ Miss Beautiful."

"...Well, certainly. Super~, Miss Beautiful she is."

"Around our university, Kaga-san is the most beautiful person I've seen. My senpai in film studies, though she said she was last year's 'Miss Campus', ah, from now on she's nothing; Kaga-san is always prettier than her. She may have done well against the other universities' quasi-Misses, or in talent shows, or even working, but if you were to compare her to Kaga-san, though they'd spoken badly of her, she'd come off like some 'Jane Doe' with split ends and no fashion sense. It feels as she had spun a tall tale, as if she had gone off hunting for bear, dressed in a fur vest and carrying a hunting gun. Yes, she had to have made it up."

A 'Jane Doe' with split ends and no fashion sense... at those harsh words, Banri's breath burst out. Oka Chinami, saying such hard things, yet adorable, making a face as if she were appealing to him. Whether she was cunning, or interesting--- perhaps a girl with spunk suited Mitsuo, because he might have found such. As far as he was concerned, Chinami's latest remarks had lifted his opinion of her.

"The thing is, I like beautiful people. I mean, everybody likes those who are conspicuous. They positively cling to those who stand out, wanting to see what's the big deal. So when I happened to notice Kaga-san I unconsciously called out to her~ even though I understand why she could dislike me. I mean really, I suddenly wanted to hug her from behind, forcibly! Her surprised face would be so cute~, embarrassed like that, making her cry... and then, then... she would turn towards me! She would look up! Click! Just like that!? Would that be a crime!? But, hihi! She's cute~ for sure!"

"O, Oka-chan, Oka-chan...!"

"Hmm? Whaat?"

"They're opening up, those thick wet flower petals!"

In the end, the two of them wound up heading for Civil Law. Kouko didn't show up, she'd probably just gone home.

"Isn't it rather crowded? Aren't there any seats? Banri, can you see?"

"Yeah, it looks pretty bad."

Chinami wasn't tall enough to look through the glass window fit into the door. Banri looked inside, checking to see if there was space for so much as a grain of rice to fit into a seat.

He spotted Mitsuo, seated all the way in the middle.

"Oh, there's Yana-ssan."

"What's that? Was 'Yana' taking this class? How's he doing, is he paying attention?"

"Err, well..."

Mitsuo was carelessly resting his chin on his hand, his eyes half closed in boredom. His hair fell smoothly to his cheek, favoring the clean line of his jaw, even yawning the guy was handsome. While the girls seated nearby looked towards Mitsuo, they argued about something in whispers, squealing, secretly excited about something. They were probably saying things like 'That guy's no good', 'He's not good looking', and so on.

Doing it so as not to be noticed, Mitsuo pulled something slowly from his pocket. Pleased with himself, secretly smiling, he peeled off the paper and plopped in his mouth. That was---

"Oh...! He's chewing the gum he found earlier...!"

"Eeee..."

Chapter 2

Tada Banri was making dinner.

Right after you come through the door, on the left side. A corridor all of one tatami wide, the little kitchen was part of a multipurpose space.

By the sink and his poor excuse for a stove, a single burner portable unit, Banri stood there, by himself, hunched over, double-checking the flame with a serious look in his eyes.

Since he moved here, or rather as far as this Banri's concerned, since he was born, this was the first time he'd done any real cooking.

He'd never before played with anything more than eggs. Worse, nothing more than boiled. Once, saying to himself, "Shall I make something myself today?", he'd bought a side dish to warm up, boiling some pasta and putting on a ready-made sauce, but normally he just made boiled eggs.

I mean, this guy really likes boiled eggs. In the morning, he got out boiled eggs. At noon, the school cafeteria or boiled eggs. In the night, whether eating while mixed up in a drinking party somewhere, with something from the supermarket, something canned or with pasta, boiled eggs. Boiled eggs are all right with me too, but I never ate them to the extent this guy does.

You'd think that omelets or fried eggs might cross his mind as alternatives, but Banri hardly made such things. Right after moving to the capital, while his mother was still there, he tried once to make ham and eggs, but it didn't turn out well. He burned the whites in his brand new frying pan, and he couldn't stomach it.

In any case, this room's stove was bad.

Even though it was new, of recent design, an electric (not induction heated) single burner stove. If you didn't have anything else, you could install an ordinary gas-burning stove yourself. Though you wait and wait, this stove's heating power is such that the frying pan doesn't heat up enough, and the egg dropped inside simply sits there.

As for me, while curiously watching Banri cooking something other than boiled eggs, I was forced to move from the kitchen to the entranceway, seated on the familiar second-hand stool. It was one of the favorite things Banri had bought from a thift store shortly after moving here.

The arches of his lowered feet reached exactly to the footrest, at just the right height to feel stable. Kicking back, sticking the backs of his shoes into the stool, propping himself up with his elbows, his body fit it really and pleasantly snug. ...I'm doing this, though of course I don't have a body anymore, waiting and watching the shape of Banri, standing there, grabbing and poking at things with his chopsticks.

As a matter of fact, as for me, I still don't really like this room. There was a room we'd already inspected that I thought was good. At the time, I was frantically trying to whisper in his ear, "This is good! Take this place!", but of course he couldn't hear me. Well, I don't think he would be setting stock in commentaries heard from a ghost. But even if he were spooked by a poltergeist, would that change his mind from now on? If I felt like it, I might be able to make the furniture rattle... to do such a thing, of course, would only be a prank. Only one month after moving here, I'd move again, but the deposit and key fees are outrageous.

So--- one month. Since Banri became a student and started living alone in that room, little by little, one month, so to speak, the days have passed.

As far as an outsider could tell, the days were good.

Making friends, registering for classes, even joining clubs. Getting kidnapped by strange cults, getting stranded, even getting dumped by a girl, Banri was somehow peaceful. Living like this, he was doing well.

And now today, this evening. Banri ought to be celebrating (though quietly), welcoming this evening as "the first time cooking decently for himself".

The registration season passed by and the new students became simply first-years, the storm of new student welcoming parties ended and the chances to go out drinking got fewer, and soon he was even going to be tired of eating boiled eggs, so Banri was resolved to do this.

"Let's do some good cooking!", he said.

And then, "Let's send an e-mail to Kaga-san!", ... he said.

I think he's pathetic. But, he's cute. At least I think so. What Kaga Kouko thinks so far, that's not my problem.

Banri, finishing sending her an e-mail to the net, had decided to appeal to her heart through conversation.

"Where'd you go today?", "Sorry about today", "I went home too", "Let's go together to tomorrow's rehearsal!", and so on, the e-mails he'd continued sending since being left behind on the way to the student affairs office had so far all been ignored.

Continuing to send her e-mails one-sidedly, "Hey? How are you? You there? No?" and so on, even though there were no answers coming, was feeling awkward. Before long there wouldn't be more things to tell her about, nothing else came to mind, when it occurred to him: the results of his cooking. He would e-mail her a picture of his cooking. It was a technique common even on TalentBlog, so maybe it wouldn't look like he was a stalker.

Using pork he'd bought from the supermarket and bok choy sent to him from home, Banri was trying to make a simple shabu-shabu. The recipe had been given to him by telephone from his personal Mieko... his mother.

Slowly, taking his time, he added the bok choy and pre-sliced pork with absurd care. One month's time was transformed, gently filling the pot with both hands, carefully measuring the ingredients with a spoon while putting them in. Banri did according to what his mother told him, completely.

The kitchen timer sounded, and ready for the moment, he lifted the lid off the pot with both hands, steam lifting up the sweet smell of the bok choy. Saying, "...Horray! I did it!", Banri struck a gutsy pose, showing off for no-one but himself.

It looked like it turned out pretty good. This time, the timer on his rice cooker had gone off perfectly. Using a rice scoop just the way his mother taught him, he stirred the freshly cooked meal, happily filling his nice round rice bowl. Carrying the pot as it was to the little table, he put it down, a copy of TVBros doing duty as a pot stand.

He arranged the chopsticks, the ladle and the plate, set ponzu sauce at the ready, not forgetting the finishing garnish: a green onion. This was already the perfectly done "cooking".

Hey, I was a little surprised. Well done. No, really. Wasn't that rather well done? Without realizing it, I applauded Banri. I didn't expect to be heard, though I wanted to make it so. Getting down from the stool, I sat down also, opposite him at the table.

Banri tried to stick his chopsticks into the pot at once, but suddenly stopped. Still seated, he stretched out his arm, pulled his cell phone from its charger and slowly took a picture of the dining table. Yes, mustn't forget your purpose. But try to eat before it cools off.

Looking across the table at that cell-phone, I started to hide myself. Will the first person it's sent to be Tada Mieko? He had been able to prepare it with just the flavor of the Tada house. Though perhaps he was taking that into consideration. And then, with regards to Yanagisawa

Mitsuo, to Yana-ssan he just said "No". Then Satou Takaya also, "No", ...wait!? What'd they call that guy? What kind of name for a guy was that? Continuing with Oka Chinami too, "No", with a barrage of little bird track symbols following after. Actually, what I saw there was a barrage of the heart marks that go with her.

And now, down to business. The most important e-mail he sent to it's destination: to Kaga Kouko.

'Dinner just now (three food marks). For today, the bok choy and pork hot pot challenge (flexing biceps mark). I tried to make our home's original recipe (sparkling star marks), a taste of home (smiley face!)'

He saw what he wrote, rewrote it, changing it again, changed his mind and rewrote it and changed that, but in the end returned to what he had written in the first place. Yeah, that was a good idea. And then he sent it.

Putting his cell-phone back, at last, Banri started eating from the pot. He said, "Thanks for the food", which though heard austerely only by myself and the television, the flavor was quite good, it seemed. Eating a mouthful, he grunted, greedily (and apparently happily) scooping up the cooked white rice. He found himself chasing his food, so to speak. In the time of boiled eggs, he'd never seen such energy.

"Ah... soo goood. ...Is that what it was? It tasted like our own home cooking..."

While Banri put his big mouth to work, he was muttering to himself a little sadly. Watching the warm steam rising from the pot, his chopsticks stopped moving for a bit.

Come to think of it, the whole year Banri was at home, the pot didn't appear on the table, did it?

"...If it's true, then it seems I must've missed it. ...Maybe that's it..."

Was this guy getting used to living alone, or was he speaking to himself more lately? Or rather, ...no, Banri.

In fact, it was something a little difficult to say--- and, an e-mail was coming back from somebody on the cell-phone. His right hand still holding the chopsticks, with bad manners, Banri opened the cell-phone again. It was from mother,

'It's a recipe from CookPad! (♥) I haven't used them even once (sweat drop)'

Banri hung his head.

...What was with that? It wasn't any particular flavor of the Tada household? He felt sorry for all the effort he had just put into it.

* * *

"Wow, as usual, cheap!"

Buying the daily special at the lunch shop Linda showed them before, Banri was feeling true respect. According to the shop-keeper lady, today's main special was sukiyaki. A mouthful of hamburger cooked together with salad greens and miso, kinpira, even macaroni salad to the side, three dollars of desperate deflation. Where is the Japanese economy headed?

"Or rather, cheaper than that."

Pointing at the cup of Starbucks she had in her hand,

"A tall latte, five dollars. But isn't this nearly 400 calories?"

"Very nutritious", said Kouko, posing as if doing a toast, a self-satisfied look on her face, batting her long eyelashes. Already, she had the same silvery plastic bag of the daily lunch special in one hand.

Meeting up at the student hall entrance after second period, Banri together with Kouko headed for the local hall Omaken used for rehearsal. While passing people on the narrow sidewalk without a guardrail, they walked fearfully, one in front of the other.

Their way to and from the law school campus passed through this area: aging office buildings and exam cram schools, eateries crowded close together in rows, and at lunchtime, the narrow sidewalk overflowed with office workers and students all at once. The two lane road had fairly heavy traffic, what with people using it as a bypass for the main street, trucks and taxis flying through, and lots of on-street parking, it had been badly planned.

"It looks surprisingly fattening, milady."

Banri, turning to look at Kouko behind him, tried to strike up a friend-like banter. The spotless Kouko was not speaking as she cautiously rounded at a distance the garbage collected in front of a bar, and jumping over a puddle of stuff that looked like it had flowed out of a ramen shop, saying "Eww" as she followed closely behind Banri.

Yesterday, having been separated from Kouko the way he was after the awkwardness with Chinami, there was not even an e-mail in reply. Banri was very anxious about what might happen, but as it turned out, he had worried needlessly.

He didn't know if there were going to be any lingering problems.

As for Banri, he intended to revive himself, a little while after he e-mailed out the picture of the dinner he had cooked for himself. An e-mail arrived from Kouko, 'Sorry! I only just realized my

cell-phone had been buried in my bag til now!' After that it was one message after another, "So it was", "Yep, it was", messaging back and forth as usual, who knows how many times? Things had stayed good today too. Banri and Kouko together as good friends, heading for the club meeting. The two of them went on with their relationship as friends as if nothing had happened.

Kouko pouted cutely at Banri looking back at her.

"From here on I'm going to dance like crazy, no problem! Or rather, me without latte, I could not live one day."

And so on she talked. Banri, "You've got to be kidding!", his finger pointing, kidding her back.

"Look at you now, exaggerating like that!"

"But it's the truth! It's an addiction. Since third year middle school, it's been something I drink every day. Rain, wind or sun, Tokyo, Hawaii or New York. Though I could always have healthy soy-latte or no-fat latte, today I'm lifting my normal ban. I've got to save up for Awa Odori, right? Wouldn't it look bad for me to be wobbling on the way? I'm storing away the calories firmly inside."

Smiling perfectly, Kaga Kouko would not look out of place doing the latest commercial for Starbucks.

And now, somehow, Kouko was really looking forward to taking on the Omaken meeting.

Her willingness showed even in today's outfit. She was wearing her deep brown hair up, her slim neck without a necklace. With only small diamond studs in her ears, and wearing old knee-length pants under her skirt, she was dressed simply, in jersey cloth that would be OK if she were to sweat. Though Kouko looked rather sporty, nevertheless she didn't look like she was planning to dance. Peeking out from her shoulder bag was a binder as if for a lecture, and she carried another paper bag. A folded T-shirt and something jersey-like could be seen there. Though the way she dressed only 'felt' sporty, it was enough for Banri.

"Is that so? You think you're going to lose weight dancing..."

C-3PO, frozen up with salt from sweat... if he said such things he would offend for sure, so of course, he didn't say it, but well, she was surely thinking about such things.

But, as if she had heard it perfectly clearly,

"Tada-kun, just now, you were thinking 'in spite of her hardly being able to dance', weren't you?"

Kouko looked at Banri's face sidelong while she walked quickly, passing him from behind. Her light-colored lip gloss glittered more beautifully than ever in the sunlight, and her impish smile shot Banri in the eyes.

"I, I wasn't thinking that! Really, I wasn't thinking that at all!"

"It's not a big deal, but just you watch. Because today I will redeem myself. Nobody's going to be calling me C-3PO anymore!"

Brimming with self-confidence, now Kouko turned towards Banri's face and spoke.

"You really could say that last time I could not dance well, that I was doing my own thing. And then I understood the reason."

"Ah, you didn't have a sense of the rhythm, did you? I wondered if I didn't have it either. And afterwards, my body was all stiff. That was awful, Kaga-san still young, yet so pitiful..."

"That's not right! It's because I had closed the doors to my heart that I had gotten into such a mess. Definitely... the 'me' of that day was, as it were, squashed flat in every way, scared by everything and shrinking back miserably from it all..."

Taking a gulp of her latte,

"...But, the 'me' of today is different from the 'me' of that day. I have been born anew. I will not go back to such a miserable state for a second time. The new Kaga Kouko, wide open to her feelings, moving forward towards a new challenge. Open to the music! Open to the rhythm too! Open even to be seen! In a word, I thought, in 'dance' that sort of awareness is important. The body doesn't matter; it should be the spirit of the dancer, her very soul. Don't you agree? The audience will remember being moved. Hey, isn't that so? You think so too, don't you? It is absolutely the truth!"

She watched Banri's face as she walked backwards. Proudly hugging the cup of latte to her chest, suddenly batting her long eyelashes, her wide eyes brightened so much as to swallow him up,

"And so, by that theory, I can surely dance already!"

Standing there, right in the middle of the way, she was an impressive nuisance. She really stood out. An office worker coming their way frowned, bothered by having to avoid Kouko, who was blocking the way.

"Have you got a problem...?"

Banri mumbled back, his head tilted to the side, but,

"It absolutely is! Well, still... there could be a problem, just one."

Kouko slowly twisted and bent, her leggings riding up so that Banri could see her calf.

"...Aaaa..."

Banri covered his mouth. It was his turn to shriek. It was a shocking sight. For a moment, he was going to faint, the plastic bag with lunch at risk of falling to the ground.

"What do you think of this? It hardly looks like it's healing from that day."

Whatever he thought,

"Tha, that wasn't a poisonous snake!?"

"Yep."

Yep, my foot. What's with that self-satisfied look on your face?

On Kouko's white calf, the aforementioned snake bite mark remained. Surprisingly, the distinct shapes of the teeth were still there. The wound was swollen and red, seemingly feverish, looking bad to the glance, and around it internal bleeding had afterwards painted ominous speckles of purple and yellow here and there. It was in a rather bad state. Hmm, Kouko looked down at her calf for herself, checking it out with a doubtful expression.

"...This looks rather like something drawn by Pucci... Do you know about him? Emilio Pucci?"

"No, I didn't know! I mean, isn't your leg going bad!? You really didn't go to the hospital!?"

"Oh yeah, but by the way! Yesterday's hot pot! That was reallly terrific! Tada-kun, an expert cook, I had no idea you had such a special skill! Sooo cool, I think!"

"Do such things as my hot pot matter!? Could you be more 'open' to heading for the hospital!? Because it's awful! That thing! Most of the time!"

"...In ~order to protect our love... heheehee~heheehee~..."

"Get a grip!"

Kouko quickly restored her leggings and hummed while they walked briskly. Walking despite her injury didn't seem to be a problem, but was this person really OK? Banri chased after her, confused.

Making Kouko promise that if it didn't subside she would go to the hospital the next day, they separated in front of the building's restrooms so they could change clothes.

For changing into, Banri had brought a pair of half-pants he normally used for sleeping, and his practically unused yellow T-shirt, which had been brought from home stuffed in a cardboard box.

Whether it was cheaply done, or it had been washed off by mistake, the design had flaked off entirely, and the present Banri had no idea what it might have said originally. Moreover, when he

tried wearing it, the tag scratched the back of his neck, moving around just a little bit, but rubbing his skin painfully.

Because of that not thinking at all of whether he could dance, reluctantly, perhaps even embarrassed, he'd put it on inside out. In any case, the design having been worn off, if law students asked, then he'd say it was for emergency evacuation drills.

With a towel to dry his sweat hanging from his neck and his bag collected, he entered the rehearsal room and,

"Oh, a first year, just now arrived."

"Or rather, aren't you wearing your T-shirt inside out?"

"What? Just come out of the bath?"

With neither Kouko nor any other women yet visible, there were a number of older guys done changing, gathered and seated in front of mirrors affixed to the wall. Though Banri had only just entered, they noticed him and called out to him.

Banri quickly took off his shoes and came up into the old-fashioned room.

"Excuuuse me! My T-shirt's IS inside out! What's that about 'just come out of the bath'?"

He politely approached the circle of senior club members, careful with how he behaved. He still wasn't matching the names and faces at all, and in truth he was secretly nervous.

"Look here, that towel. Officially, hanging it from your neck like that is crude."

Putting his hand to his neck while giving Banri a friendly smile, the super-short-haired senpai reminded him in some respects of a monkey. Certainly so-and-so-sempai... these members of the Omaken somehow, nobody could call them zeroes, and these kind people seem to have carried their own share of the burdens. Their burly shoulders peeked randomly through absorbent T-shirts, and as Banri was answering with lines like "Is that so?", without thinking about it, he tried to conceal his pitiful shoulders with both hands.

"The towel goes here, like this. This is the Omaken 'style'.

So-and-so-senpai stood up and suddenly turned his back towards Banri. Folding up the towel so it was long and narrow, he stuffed it in his back pocket, making sure that fully half of it was dangling out.

If you tell him something is really cool, Banri will do it at once. He went all around the room, looking at what the senpai were doing, asking "How do I do that!?" The kind-hearted senpais nodded encouragingly at him, saying things like "There, there! That's good! You're looking good! That's the rhythm!" It was only their way of giving a lot of attention to this year's only

freshman male, but though he hardly knew them he accepted it dutifully as their underclassman.

While Banri played the foolish junior-classman, he noticed what was on their feet.

"Are those sneakers? What kind are they?"

A pair of sneakers, looking like new, their laces still untied, were spread out on top of some paper.

"Yes, good thing you showed up. Do you wear these too?"

"There was a guy who wanted to buy these, and all of us were trying them out. But they're oddly small and narrow, and they don't fit anybody. If they fit you, he said you can have them for 5000 yen."

Banri looked over the sneakers once more, this time carefully, as something to be bought. Might the soles have been made thick enough to stand up to abuse?

"Sixty-five is it...? That's rather steep, I haven't got a part-time job yet... ah, but, these sure are cool."

"Aren't they? They're cool! They haven't been worn but once since they were bought, but even were they used, they might as well have been new. Besides, this is a popular model, shown in magazines. Wouldn't they usually be 20000 yen or more?"

Normally over 20000 yen... Banri took one of the sneakers in each hand, looking them over hard.

So light they felt as if they were floating in his hands, they were NewBalance running shoes.

With regards to footwear at the present time he had: the leather shoes he'd worn for the entrance ceremony, his favorite Jack Purcells he wore nearly every day, some sandals from a convenience store, and then of course his least favorite, some cheap, out of style, no-brand sneakers he wore on rainy days. Just those. As a male college freshman, he was about ready to have another pair of shoes. Besides, if he bought new shoes, what kind would he get for 2000 to 3000 yen? These might be good at 5000 yen.

"OK then. Well, give it a try!"

"I'm getting there."

Thinking "Something like Cinderella...", while the evil stepsisters, or rather, the nice upperclassmen watched attentively, Banri gingerly tried to insert one foot.

"How is it?"

"A little tight?"

He realized that from the tips of his toes to the heel, it fit good and snug.

"No... it looks like its OK for me. Will it be better on both feet?"

With one foot already set, he stepped lightly around the room. Though the laces weren't tied, nothing else seemed out of place, and it didn't seem like size was a problem. Crowding around Banri, uh... their eyes wide, there was quite a commotion amongst the guys. Was this kid somehow Cinderella...? Glass NBs fitting him perfectly, what is this kid...? This skinny, slump-shouldered, unpopular seeming youngster, with the apparently disposition to blemishes...? This kid's amazing...!

"Look, it fits perfectly! I'm Cinderella Boy! Wow, my foot is light!"

Putting on both shoes upon the paper, Banri could be seen jumping lightly around the place.

His feet accustomed to the heavy Jack Purcells, these modern, stylishly and lovingly crafted running shoes, they seemed as if he were wearing wings. Perhaps because he was on tatami mats, the firm souls felt comfortable under his feet. This is good. Absolutely good.

"I've decided! I'll buy them! I want 'em! At 5000 yen, I'll go for it! But who should I be paying?"

Just as Banri carefully stepped back to the spread-out paper, he saw the entrance door opening. Linda entered first, then some older girls, and then, done changing, Kouko came inside the room.

"Oh, you're just in time. Look here! This freshman's buying the shoes!"

"Oh? Really?"

Lifting her voice and turning towards them, it was Linda. Banri was a little bewildered. Since the shoes were for guys, he'd naturally thought the seller was a guy.

"These are Linda-senpai's shoes?"

"Yep, they are."

Wearing her usual long sleeve T-shirt under another T-shirt, plus knee-length nylon running pants, and for some reason barefoot, Linda, as always aloof from the world, came towards them in her easy way,

"Does it fit? It isn't too small?"

Like a shoe-store clerk she leaned over Banri's feet, as if she were double-checking his toes,

pushing down on the shoes from above with her thumbs.

Swaying just below his eyes was Linda's straight, shiny hair. It smelled fresh. It was parted straight. The nape of her neck was slim. ...It was perhaps a little dangerous, seeing her like this from close by.

Moreover, something you don't see everyday: the tops of Linda's feet were unusually white, all the veins showing through light blue. Completely different from his own feet, they were incredibly beautiful. Obviously, if they were held gently, tenderly in one's mouth, sweet seeming, "...Ah, Linda-senpai's 'feet' were like candies, as they are, I want to eat them---", but putting things like that into words was a way to go straight to the inferno of the perverts.

"They, they're sorta OK..."

While answering without hesitation, Banri hurriedly averted his gaze.

What was he thinking all of a sudden? Idiot idiot idiot, you stupid idiot. Linda's feet are too beautiful, but that's no good. They really are pretty. Her fingers are long, her nails specially done, looking like pink tellin shells, even her smooth looking skin, if he were to touch it surely... ah enough already, really! You stinking fool! Since he'd put on that jersey, a strange and fatal transformation had befallen him!

He turned his head with all his might. And there was Kouko's face, suddenly, perfectly, completely before his eyes. Not knowing what he should do, his first impulse was to put on a joking face. Tilting her head to the side as if mystified, Kouko, dressed in a shocking pink jersey, was looking back at Banri's face. That perfectly prepared, white and beautiful face.

Ah, she's beautiful too... sorry. Maybe I really have some strange foot fetish...

Linda didn't even notice the perverted oinks sounding nearby and squatted down, grabbing hold of those distracting feet of hers,

"Hey, are they really OK? Up to a minute ago, just what size were they?"

She twisted his foot around and checked the size under the soles of the shoes.

A little rough with her hands, having bent his ankle like that, but she really was a gentle and good senpai. Banri finally having regained possession of himself, he automatically, in his heart, silently hung his head. For a junior to be thinking such things of this good person, about licking her feet and such, he ought to be excusing himself to the max. At the least. He ought to be doing some serious reflection. Really.

And, at that moment, on Linda's neck, below his eyes, he noticed something. It was a clothing tag. The long-sleeved T-shirt she wore inside had turned out little outwards, and from the neckline a tag could be seen.

So cute... even having thought that way, shouldn't he apologize?

While grinning like a scatterbrain who just got surprised, Banri tried to speak softly so that only Linda would hear.

"Linda-sempai. We match."

"Oh? How so?"

"Look here", Banri pointed at the tag sticking out from the neck of his own T-shirt's back side.

At that moment, it seemed, was when Linda first looked at what Banri was wearing. And then, her eyes widened.

As if beaten, her shoulders went stiff, and clearly her breathing had paused.

I wonder if she's realized her mistake, Banri thought. That sort of thing could really surprise you.

"Ah, I put mine on inside out on purpose though. For some reason, the tag scratches me something fierce."

Linda didn't say anything else.

"I'm kidding!", "Seriously!?", he said, confused and putting his hand to the back of his neck, his face going a little red perhaps--- she was not expecting a Banri like that at all. Linda, her eyes still wide, stood up without saying anything else. Like a person seen in a dream, or a hallucination, in some respects his behavior seemed bizarre.

And then, the height of her gaze hardly changed, she stared fixedly at Banri's face. Linda's face was frozen in place, her eyes still open wide.

'What kind of look is that?', Banri thought. Peeling the skin of his face to the flesh, through his eyes to his brain, seemingly so as to see through to his very thoughts. That look was like being examined under a powerful X-ray.

"...Eh? Uh, err, ...what're you doing?"

Bewildered, for an instant, Banri flinched.

What? What? What's going on...? Becoming agitated, he rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand.

Was Linda perhaps trying to see the real Banri she had known in this Banri she didn't know? If, if that was the case, ...his forehead suddenly broke out in a strange sweat.

But, why now all of a sudden? For what reason? Was there something I did? What the heck

should I do? What should I do to fit into this place? My wish is for things to stay as they are. Banri the underclassman and Linda the upperclassman, because they said some nice things to each other, he wanted things to stay like that.

Linda kept on staring straight at Banri, who was keeping his mouth shut. She continued like that for several breaths.

And then, finally.

Finally, smiling as always, showing her teeth,

"Me too, on purpose."

Up to this point silent, gazing, now she laughed with a smile, as if it were all a joke.

Simply embarrassing a mere lowerclassman by giving him the evil eye. And she really had him going there. She'd deftly changed the atmosphere into such a joke. Involuntarily, Banri let out a sigh. He hadn't even noticed that he'd been holding his breath.

Ah, things are back to normal. Good---.

"It does scratch a bit, doesn't it? Mine does too. Since I wear something over it, I didn't think there'd be a problem with wearing it inside out. But for a guy to see it, I mean, having it pointed out can be embarrassing. Of course, I wonder if I ought to go change."

"No no! It's not embarrassing at all! You did it on purpose!"

Banri pointed challengingly to the inside-out, worn yellow T-shirt, hanging down in the space between the two of them, and his voice changed completely. Messing around, pretending to be a comedian, he held his index finger up while he puffed out his chest absurdly.

"Such a design this is! Linda-senpai's too, such a design! They match! A daringly stylish match! We're two of a kind!"

"What the!?", Linda blurted out, laughing softly.

Then seeming to have a hard time breathing she twisted, lowered her face, and looked away from Banri's eyes. Three seconds later she got up, swept her hair out of the way,

"Cool! I get it! Well then, it was by fate that we matched, and if those shoes are for Tada Banri, then I'll give them to him for free! In any case, it's only Banri, right? Sort of."

As usual, he was so relieved he was spouting foolishness. But suddenly there was gratitude as well, Banri lifting his voice in surprise.

"What was that we heard!?" "For free!?" "Isn't that favoritism!?" There was an uproar amongst

the upperclassmen. "If it's free I want it.", "No, I want it for me.", "Auction it.", "I wouldn't make my little brother wear worn shoes." --- talking altogether like the French palace guards in 'Rose of Versailles' upon finding something had been completely sold out.

"No way, no, no, way. If you guys buy it, you'll pay me 5000 yen! Are you underclassmen? Cute, precious, one of only two first-years? This isn't about money. Right?"

With a smile, Linda tried to pique Banri's interest.

"Eh, eh, but, but, is it really OK!? Eh, really!? ...Is it really OK!?"

Taking the shoes off and hugging them to his chest, Banri was virtually jumping in delight, hardly able to restrain himself. Of course, it wouldn't do to be too presumptious, would it?

"It's OK, really. I caught a glimpse of them in the store, and they told me they were the very last pair. Even though they didn't have my size, I bought it in a hurry, on impulse. Then, as you might expect, it turned out to be too big for me. Even with the laces tied, my heels rattled around, and they didn't look good. I don't know anything about an auction and any such thing. Still, we're only spiffing up the little guy because he's always unfortunate, you see, but he wears them well. I'm telling you guys, this guy was born for these shoes!"

"Ah, then, I'll pay just half price! Please let me pay 25, even that would still be an incredible bargain!"

While Banri started looking through his stuff for his wallet, Linda took the shoes from Banri's hands.

"So, don't worry about it. Here, I said, let's give a really good present to the cute underclassman. And then he will worship these up-and-coming upperclassmen!"

The second part a joke, Linda laughed. Not looking like she intended to let Banri pay, she quickly gathered the wrappings from upon the tatami mat and repacked the shoes in their box. And then having deftly dropped it into a paper bag,

"Here. They're a present, Tada Banri. That they are good, they fit perfectly, they're good shoes and that you are happy to have good senpais, when you wear these again, remember!"

"Aha, but..."

We, we really are classmates, aren't we?

Or rather, we, ...such things... no, let's stop.

Let's stop this.

I'd chosen to forget. I'd hoped things would stay 'as they are'. Had you not wished that not so

long ago? With everything he had, Banri returned an underclassman-like smile.

"...Yes! Thank you very much! I'm happy! I will absolutely take care of them!"

As if he couldn't quite get some words out, he hung his head. And then playing the fool, he suddenly turned on one foot.

With a happy-looking face holding the paper bag up as if it were something sacred, wearing the grin of a fool and walking like one,

"Wow! I've been given shoes! Yay!"

Pointing at the paper bag for Kouko while showing it to her proudly.

"They're NewBalance, gray and super cool guy! I'm incredibly happy! I'm happy!"

Making as if he were hugging them and twisting his body, to the point of shaking his hips, Banri had every intention of showing his delight 1000 percent, over and over again.

However,

"...Tada-kun"

Kouko wasn't laughing, nor anything else.

Her white, perfectly made up face was stiff. At once, Banri thought, "Eh, is there something awfully dirty stuck to my teeth?" Or, is my zipper open, a jungle snake aiming at Kaga-san? No, isn't that impossible with running pants?

What on earth? Gazing fixedly into Banri's eyes as if puzzled, Kouko brought her face close to him. Then, she lowered her voice to a whisper so the others wouldn't be able to hear.

"Was that mere chance...?"

"Wh, what!?"

Gazing steadily back at the foolishly behaving Banri without averting her eyes, Kouko quietly closed her mouth for a little bit. As if she were about to nod off, her long eyelashes cast shadows, making highlights deeper than black mascara. And then, like that, a smile came to her face and once more, with a little more volume, she asked him a short question.

"...Did something happen between you and Linda-senpai...?"

"So, what!?"

His voice was intended to be boundlessly cheerful, but unexpectedly, a bit of irritation got mixed

in. As if he'd been plainly attacked, he was not entirely in control of himself.

What on earth was Kouko worried about? When she doesn't even know anything about the situation. When she doesn't know anything about Linda nor Banri. And where in this self, where in the world, is the part she wants to worry about, so to speak? Or is there? When I haven't even told close friends nor anybody, you want me to explain it all to you, is that what you want me to tell you?

Almost, almost you--- taking a breath, ready to open his mouth and tell Kouko something he didn't know for himself,

"Well then! Let's eat lunch, and then start the rehearsal!"

One of the senpais clapped his hands together loudly, raising his voice. "Yes!", "Hey!", from here and there voices returned in answer.

Banri came back to himself.

Before his eyes was Kouko.

The girl to whom he had even confessed his love. Even now, he thought regretfully, his companion. Prettier than anyone else, awkward, but truly a gentle woman.

In complete desperation, he too yelled back "Yo!" with the breath he had been holding. So that nothing else could happen, he pulled himself together, got himself moving, and distributed the sitting cushions like a good underclassman.

Kouko was still looking at Banri like she wanted to say something, but at that moment,

"Yo! Shall we do Awa Odori!?"

Several men and women in suits that he'd not seen before pushed open the door without warning and came inside. It appeared that fourth-year senpais were popping in after a long absence, with everybody but Banri and Kouko raising delighted-sounding voices, running over to welcome them.

"Hurray, senpaai! Very long time no see!”

"How goes the job hunt!? Have you already decided on anything!?"

"You fools, the real thing is yet to come! Of course nobody's got a tentative offer yet! It's tough, being prepared and all, and you guys will be out there before long too!"

Gasp! Their shrieks echoed in the small rehearsal hall. But at once even that turned to laughter, the clamor of conversation swallowing it up.

"Oh yeah, oh yeah, senpai, we've finally had some first-years join! Yo, Tada, Kaga-chan, get over here!"

Being called over to the one senpai like a pet dog, Banri and Kouko were roughly pushed in the back, not waiting for them to answer. They were brought before the fourth-years.

Linda pointed at the two of them with her thumb,

"Look here, these are the kids that got into trouble. The kids we found while at training camp. We told you about them, the ones entangled in that strange church..."

"Ahhh! Those kids!", the suited senpais nodded, seeming interested. For some reason extremely self-conscious, Banri and Kouko managed weak smiles and said, "Ahaha...haa...that's so...", while hardly able to exchange a small glance amongst themselves. It was as if the conspicuous fools they had been yesterday were brought vividly back to life. One of the senpais elbowed another, and while they looked at Kouko they chatted, "Really pretty really pretty really pretty", "A first for Omaken" and so on, whispering intensely. But it was all quite audible.

Linda brought her mouth close to them,

"Tada Banri and Kouko-chan, these guys are the fourth-year senpais, and this is the former president, Hosshii-san."

...There it was, that 'so-and-so-sshii' pattern. Was Kouko thinking the same thing? Even Banri could see her eyebrows raised slightly.

"And behind him are just regular senpais. They are currently scratching around, trying to find their jobs."

They cried back, "What's with 'regular senpais'!?", "That's awful!" Linda simply smiled sidelong.

"I mean, really, work hard, make yourselves a company and then hire all the Omaken juniors automatically, please. Or rather, I mean, did you bring us souvenirs? Treats?"

"Treats, yummies, mamaa, papaa", everybody teased the fourth-years.

Banri got into it too, and took part, and tried to draw nearer to one of the unknown guys in suits. Kouko too caught the spirit, and reached out tentatively, taking part for the moment.

"Noisy buggers, keep your hands off! As for treats, they're over here!"

The former president, the tall so-and-so-sshii that had been introduced, set a cardboard box he'd brought under his arm on top of the tatami mat with a thud. With a 'whoa!', the active Omaken members leaped at the box like a bunch of starving hyenas. With the mess they were making, was it snack food, or what?

Energetically tearing off the paper packing tape, somebody opened up the cardboard box. And then, everybody able to see inside at the same time, the clamor transformed into vague confusion. All at once the voltage dropped. One self-satisfied face,

"It had to be, absolutely. Even on time for rehearsal. It's for Awa Odori."

The former president. The other fourth-years looked around, holding in their laughter.

Each of them looked at what they had in their hands,

"...Though we really need them..."

Having gotten their hopes up that maybe everybody would get donuts from Mr. Donut or Krispy Kreme, or chicken from MOS Burger or Family-mart, or maybe manju buns with meat filling, or ice cream, or even something to drink, their hopes were dashed.

"...Fans..."

They weren't.

Banri too felt defeated, gazing at them solemnly, reflecting on his disappointment along with the senpais. There had been stuffed into that cardboard box fans for everybody in the group. For whatever on earth sense it made, on the one side was "YES", on the other was "NO"--- They were Yes/No fans, so to speak.

"Hey, show a little more gratitude, the fourth years all made these specially for you. Aren't they the real thing? They're my own design! Anyway, use them when you practice for the performance. Nah, look, look, smile! Shout! Shouldn't you be glad!?"

Everybody showed the "NO" side towards the former president. They were convenient, for sure.

"Wh, what the... such awful-looking lower-classmen you are! Man... even if I don't go nor cannot go to the employment agency again, my feelings have been hurt! Am I without a job offer, unpopular, without friends? Are you suggesting that I am becoming an insignificant bum without job nor prospects!? Waahhh!"

Watching the former president grieving amongst them, for various reasons, the NO sides facing him making him so pitiful, Banri lowered his fan. It looked like everybody else felt the same way.

...Well, as you might expect, there wasn't any more criticism... they had been about to weaken, as if they were exposed to a bitter headwind... or rather, they saw the shape of their own future... that sort of atmosphere was hanging over the rehearsal hall.

One of the senpais, leaning importantly against the wall, lifted up a cloth sack.

Removing the bag, a beautifully polished little musical instrument, a kane bell, was revealed to view. Of elegant silver, attached to a long handle, it was shaped like a little frying pan .

The senpai, holding it, with one hand serving as drumstick, 'Ko Ko Kon!', rapped on it as if to test it. There was a sharp, piercing sound. Surprised, everybody looked over that way.

And then, they took a breath.

The rhythm started slowly, the rhythm of Awa Odori.

Well, it was a festival.

"Whoa... something good, the feeling from that!"

"Ah! The dance, it makes me long for summer!"

Even the suited senpais, suddenly looked over towards the instruments, their eyes gleaming. It seemed that the festival-going blood in them, fostered by the Omaken activities, had been roused.

While ringing the bell, the guy doing the ringing made eye contact with Linda. Excitedly, he also spoke quickly. Linda smiled and nodded quickly, pulling from her pocket a white object. Then it dawned on Banri why she had been barefoot. Crouching down, she quickly put on tabi socks, and standing with her heels still exposed,

"We still haven't started the practice, though today we will just be stretching still, for the moment with this feeling. We'll be borrowing a taiko drum starting with the next practice... one, two,"

With her fingertips, she took hold of the fan by its bamboo roots.

Whoosh, with her heart in it, the tips of their toes pushed into the tatami floor.

Her knees lightly lifting up, she danced flutteringly, like a butterfly.

Banri was captivated by that surpassingly brilliant dance. Though she was wearing a short T-shirt and track pants, dancing, she became a dazzling flower. From the sudden turns, her arms stretching out, and her feet springing up, the tatami mat rang.

"How's this?", tilting her chin upwards slightly, as if trying a pose, her gaze glamourous. "Yo!", the fourth-years cheered her on, their sharp whistles slicing the air.

Linda was not the least bit shy. Neither was she embarrassed. Still, she was the only one dancing and having fun, and even on this side I'm beginning to get upset from only watching. Even Banri was slowly getting impatient. I wanna go, me too, he was thinking. Before long, even the other members ran out of patience, and taking their fan's handles pressed them to the side of their jerseys, near the back, and then while lifting them one-handedly like Linda, they slowly began to

take on the Awa Odori style.

Banri stepped out on the tatami mat too, on his toes. At first a bit carefully, gingerly alternating his gait, he dropped his hips into the men's dance. With the knees flexed. All the time, as if he was floating. Isn't it strange? Isn't it funny? Doesn't it get to be embarrassing? Briefly looking at the mirror, he discovered that he had slipped into the group, dancing like the others. Moving a little humorously, but truth be told, making rather good use of his entire body, the dance was quick and dynamic, more so than the popular image of it. He fit into the swaying group too, blushing red as a beet. If the Banri inside the mirror were to notice, he would laugh out of control. Himself, and everybody else, was smiling, breathing to the rhythm, quite pleasantly, as they were beginning to entrust the speed of their bodies to the musical instruments.

The rhythm light, but quick, Banri too moved both hands naturally back and forth. He danced it easily. Freely through the air, jumping to the splinters of sound, his fingertips moved flutteringly as if they were swimming. Strangely having fun, his head was going blank, aah, but, his footsteps were always too restricted. His hip joints were stiff. Looking in the mirror, his own image was not 'floating' that much. He was stomping too much... a little softer... more dynamic... besides, if everybody were to move together... piling on the practice, would they not be able to get a better feel for it?

Even the senpais in suits, lined up and standing around the door, were nodding to the beat and setting the heavy-looking bag on the floor by their feet. While watching the moving forms of the underclassmen, they started to clap their hands.

And then, finally, Kouko started moving.

Gasping in surprise, Banri looked over towards Kouko without thinking. Kouko, for quite a while in the corner, beating time, seeming to be having fun, now at last, holding a fan in her white hand, she was beginning to tilt her head back and forth. Somehow or other, it felt like she was coming alive. Finally, with an open feeling, was the soul of the dancer coming out? The other members, apart from Banri, seemed to notice Kouko, their glances starting to turn her way.

Kouko, her eyes half closed, her hips lowered, soon lifted both hands high.

Crack! Flash! A flash of gold shone from her.

* * *

"Tada-kun, you're awful...!"

"...That wasn't really my intention..."

"Tada-kun laughed and left me to take the blame...!"

"...Not so. But, really, I'm sorry..."

Fully two hours of practice over with, on the way out to the street.

Done changing, the upperclassmen having returned the key to the counter, there was the sound of many footsteps and all of them saying things like "See ya!", "Are you guys going to play mahjongg again?", "I'm beat!", "Are you going to the Criminal Procedure Code lecture?" and so on while they split up, heading off to the station, the campus and other places. Linda was making as if to go with other upperclassmen to the station also, but while still standing in the middle of the road she spotted the pair of freshmen and walked back towards them. Deliberately.

"Well then, Tada Banri and Kouko-chan, until the next practice, OK?"

With an wonderfully kind, benevolent smile,

"I mean, well, after all, since somebody's always hanging around the lobby, if you two show up there now and then, try and double-check the schedule! For the time being, the table in front of the bulletin board and to the side is where the Omaken tend to gather. That is, well, you see..., er, um, that... I really am tired. But that's entirely OK!"

She clapped Kouko on the shoulder. Wordlessly, Kouko looked at the shoulder that was struck.

The other upperclassmen saw what was happening too, and of course as one the group, with kindly-to-the-max smiles, said "Really, really.", "Always, always.", "It's OK, it's OK.", as if they were chanting, while they waved for them to come over.

"That, leg, well, there's nothing that can be done about it. Yes, oh yeah! The snake, it was bad!"

With an expression rather like a combat cameraman, Linda gently encouraged Kouko, in the end grabbing the shoulder she had clapped before once more, firmly, patting her twice on the back softly as if to finish cheering her up, and then went on towards the station, heading out into the chaotic street.

Banri,

"We... well then..."

He muttered, completely in a daze. Kouko looked over at his face.

A curl of her bangs flipped over to the tip of her nose, and her lip gloss had melted off, her dried lips part-way open. From mascara melting, the area around her eyes was dyed black, and in those eyes were the words, "What Was That?"

That sorrowful face was well below the standards of Kaga Kouko, the perfect Queen of Roses.

Gasping involuntarily, Banri spoke.

"Look, about the snake... I didn't say anything to Linda-senpai, nor to the other senpais..."

With a dry, crackling sound... the skin of Kouko's face was losing color even faster.

Saying that mind over matter is not enough, one who cannot dance, cannot dance, the facts were finally hitting home, and the flame of Kouko's life was guttering out.

---At first, she was giving off a rather subdued aura.

Invited by Linda into the maelstrom of dancing, Kouko came right in naturally, Banri thought. "Isn't this life?", she'd asked. Saying this and that, "Aren't I a woman of my word?", she'd said. "I am looking ahead! I am open! I can dance!" ...Since she'd gone so far as to declare magnificently, "I can dance!", then perhaps Kouko really would become able to dance. So he thought. To the extent that her sorry, untrained state had been exposed for all to see last time, the only problem (as she said) was in her head. She said that the new Kaga Kouko had overcome all of that, and had become a person able to dance.

But, unfortunately, that he'd thought so was really only the beginning.

Had Kouko done well for only about two seconds or so?

Taking the position, her long slim arm outstretched, she was certainly doing well until she held out her fan. She did extremely well in stepping out, on tiptoes, with one foot onto the tatami mat. Lightly turning her slender body, supple like a willow reed, with downcast eyes pretty like flowers, everyone gasped together, Banri too. It was like that for two seconds.

It was after that.

Falling into the beat of the instruments, raising both her arms, standing on tiptoe, swinging her partway bent-over body, changing her gait, Kouko all of a sudden had become rather 'interesting'.

The underside of her arms still raised, her chest went rigid. Her shoulders stiffened and stopped moving. Her elbows were still held out at right angles. Her spine was as if plaster had been stuffed into it. The upper half of her body swayed back and forth in a courageous effort, but the other half was resisting, continuing to shake like a roughly grade three earthquake. Her hips, joints and knees were entirely inflexible, everything setting into hard angles. It was awful.

Even before she noticed the gazes around her, it looked like even she was thinking, "Huh?" Huh? For some reason her own appearance...? Opening her eyes round and wide, Kouko was trying to look at herself, her face tilted downward. Still, it was that expression. Those angles.

There she was, 'that' again.

Snorting, Banri was forced to lower his face and hide his expression. He could not laugh--- And not just Banri, all the rest of the Omaken must have been thinking the same. If he burst into laughter here, he'd hurt Kouko after all the effort she made to come back. So, he'd pretend not to know for now, ah but... no, he couldn't. ...But... they were just too much alike...

Before long, there was a disturbance, the fourth-year senpais talking in low voices. They were saying things like "What does that remind me of...", "What was it, it's right on the tip of my tongue..." and "I know that...!" They could be each seen tilting their heads, holding their foreheads, and looking over at the twitchily moving Kouko, and then saying more: "Ah, that fellow, he's here, isn't he..." and "...Who was it...?"

Even Kouko was starting to notice it. Seeing her own ridiculous body in the mirror, fluttering uneasily, and seeing the suited senpais with their heads tilted to the side, her brows furrowed, apparently in distress. As if searching for help, she looked towards her best friend Banri.

Just what the heck was the right thing to do in that place, just what Kouko wanted him to do, Banri as yet had no idea.

But, already, he could not undo what had been done.

What do I do? His mind going blank in desperation, Banri rushed over to Kouko's side. And then, making a circle from his thumb and his other fingers, he mimed making his torso turn around. Needless to say, he was her buddy, R2-D2. Quite unintentionally, he had given the fourth-years a hint.

As a result, the fourth-years clapped their hands happily and said, "Ah! From Star Wars...!" The rest of the senpais, unable to take it anymore, stopped dancing and, here and there started breaking into laughter. But Banri somehow kept his cool. Or rather, pierced by Kouko's gaze towards him, he couldn't possibly laugh.

The fourth-years, not knowing the details of what was going on to this point, with a burst of laughter took off their suit-coats, surrounded Kouko and started to coach her, saying things like, "Ahhahha! This kid is useless!", "Look here, what's this!", "Don't you have any sense of rhythm!?", "Straighten up your back some more!", "It should be like this.", "Like this, don't you think?" and so on. Though they had definitely never done Awa Odori before, the fact was that they, who had only watched for a few minutes, looked overwhelmingly better than Kouko.

Before long Kouko stopped dancing, and suddenly holding her stomach, she groaned and sat down on the tatami floor. The other club members gathering around and asking what was happening, what was going on, she looked up sharply, with teary eyes, and said just one thing:

'I can't dance anymore, my legs are hurting already!'

Amongst the silent accusations of "It can't be your stomach!" flying about, she raised the cuff of her running pants, suddenly showing to all around the speckled pattern of her bruises. Linda screamed especially loudly, covering her mouth, taken aback. Banri reflexively took over, backing up Kouko. That's what it was! Her not being able to dance was because of her snake-bite! Look, that wound must be awful!

---And so, Kouko was able to introduce herself to all the members of the Omaken, and at the same time tell the tale of the battle against the snake.

"This is no good! No good at all! Not only am I completely embarrassed, but Tada-kun has betrayed me!"

"For that reason, I say sorry sorry, sorry... but what was I supposed to do to back you up?"

"At least, if we're friends then don't make me the punch-line! What, what's with this...!"

Kouko showed how R2-D2 moved about (that by itself was rather cute),

"Don't give me 'Wiii wiii'! Haven't we gotten to be friends!?"

Glaring at Banri, slowly but surely tears began to well up in the corners of her eyes. Her soft lips trembling, Banri panicked,

"We're friends! Really good friends! Look, look, Sex and the City!"

Taking Kouko firmly by the shoulder, he tried to walk daintily on his toes, with deep strides. He acted it out as much as he could, flapping his other arm around,

"Naaaa!"

At Kouko's angry shout, the other students-like guys could be heard arguing amongst themselves, "Is it a fight?", "Something incredible's going on." and so on.

Gulping once, Kouko waited until they went away.

"...Enough, stop it...!"

She glared at Banri even more strongly. Her eyes were already bright red.

"But, ...you only wanted to try harder in going forward...!"

Before his eyes, groaning as if wrung out, her temples, head, throat . . . all the way to her chest, she flushed bright red all at once. And then,

"But I thought I was 'able to change'...! I should have been able to get good at it... and yet why, why did this happen again...!"

From beneath her tightly closed eyelashes, at last large teardrops started rolling out. At three in the afternoon, with all the proper office workers and people from the surrounding areas coming downtown, there weren't many people they might know from their same school walking around the place. All the same, even Banri was losing his composure, desperately peeking towards Kouko's face.

"That kind of thing, hold on... it's nothing to cry about, is it...?"

"...Buuttt...!"

While crying aloud like a child, Kouko,

"...Tada-kun, sowwy!"

Her feelings had changed suddenly from rage to "sowwy". Catching hold of Banri's outstretched arm, she leaned against him. Her hands were warm and damp, like a baby's. Hiding her reddened, tear-stained face, she argued insistently in a whining voice.

"Sowwy, even though I unnerstan', and a guy's aroun'..."

"Ooo..."

Unable to hug her or do anything like that, of course, keeping his arm extended stiffly as support, Banri held Kouko up. While casually doing so, he guided her to a place amongst the bushes by the sidewalk. Like a drowning person desperately grabbing a piece of wood, Kouko stood with Banri's arm for support.

“We’ve beeng going aroud as fwends, I dow, I dow... you’re making fwends with a widdle kid...”

We go together to the school club, we eat lunch together, we dance together, you even listen to my problems. You send me e-mails. You worry about many things for me. Tada-kun has been a friend for me. I know that. But I’m acting like a spoiled brat, being a bother. Even Tada-kun must have been shocked--- Kouko said these things in a quavering voice while rubbing her face with the back of her hand like a child.

Yes.

Indeed.

Because they were friends, he ought to be putting his arm around the slender shoulders of the trembling woman, and brushing away the hair clinging to her wet cheeks with his finger, but he did not. He could not. In an unnatural stance, his arms stiffly raised, Banri patiently waited for Kouko to raise her face.

“...There there there, look, for now, cheer up! It isn’t something to cry over. It’s something to laugh about. I mean, it was only because I did those strange things that the mood turned out the way it did. And you’ll be fine if you try hard at the next practice. Right?”

Still behaving like a spoiled little girl, Kouko was hanging her head. As it was, her face was lowered so much, it was as if she’d gone all the way to Brazil.

"Oh, oh yeah, why don't we go to Starbucks!? Don't you like Starbucks!? Let's go! If we're friends, then going to Starbucks afterwards ought to be natural!"

"...I already had some earlier..."

Some seconds passed, and she muttered softly, but Kouko finally, slowly, raised her head. Rubbing her reddened nose,

"...But, if Tada-kun wants to drink Starbucks, I'll go with him anytime! We're friends, after all."

She chuckled.

Her dry lips lighting up with the three syllables, "Fi-nal-ly!", and giving an embarrassed smile, Kouko rubbed her sticky face with her fingertips. Laughing at the state she was in, and looking like she was trying to clean herself up, she shrugged her shoulders.

To put it mildly, she was a mess.

Her hair as messy as could be, her makeup running, and her nose was all red. If her customary good looks were 100, then earlier she was at 61, and now she had fallen to about 46.

However, more than any moment up to now, more than any time he'd seen any face of Kaga Kouko, his chest tightened. Not pretending at all, he smiled back at her with all he had.

If they were truly friends, then the pain didn't matter.

Banri insisted on treating Kouko, Kouko insisted on treating Banri, and in the end Kouko bought Banri's share, and Banri bought Kouko's share, meaning it didn't make much sense when eventually they paid.

For the time being, could he do something for Kouko's sake?

"Aren't you incredible!?"

"A latte, with a shot of espresso, vanilla syrup, whipped cream, caramel sauce and chocolate sauce. In a Grande. And you, Tada-kun?"

"For me, a normal Starbucks latte."

Each of them holding their trays carefully in both hands, they sat down, lined up at the counter seats facing outwards, looking out on the street.

While gazing at the people going to and fro, the two of them sighed reflexively. Both of them hearing this, with the same timing, mirror images of each other, they exchanged glances.

"...I'm really sorry for what happened earlier. Crying like that, I was ridiculous, wasn't I?"

It was the smiling Kouko from before.

The area around her eyes was still puffy and red. Her mascara had run, casting a shadow on her cheeks from her white eyelids and long, delicate eyelashes. And then, casting her profile suddenly downwards,

"I was a bit... over the top. Perhaps."

Kouko said that under her breath, embarrassed.

"Yeah, it rather felt like that."

Carefully sipping his hot coffee latte, Banri continued waiting on Kouko's words.

And, he realized. Seated next to her like this, he might perhaps be able to start talking with her in a normal way, easily.

Playing with her earrings with the tips of her beige fingernails, Kouko scooped only the tip of the whipped cream with her spoon, sticking her tongue out like a cat to taste it. Mixing the chocolate and caramel sauce a little to a marbled state, she took a slightly larger mouthful.

And then,

"...I was awfully, impatient."

She licked her lips and turned towards Banri. Once more, he was surprised by how big her eyes seemed from close by. Through the transparent surface of her eyes, they were brown. Now trembling and forlorn, they shone with a gentle light.

"Even I understand I am making a mess of things. Nowadays I, somehow, really, cannot help it. I think it's dangerous. ...I mean, from the beginning, I've been aware of how easy it was for me to make a mess of things. In a word, I,"

It's hard to to rescue somebody from their foolishness... from their impatience... He nodded to the words that followed, whether they were good or not.

"I wanted to settle many matters once and for all. Stubbornly, I wouldn't let go of my failures in the past. I thought to make it all new, starting right away."

"By those, 'failures in the past', you're referring, of course, to Yana-ssan?"

Kouko looked away.

"Yes. ...That's it. That, is the big one! The biggest. Of course it is! ...However I might excuse

myself, I won't do that in front of you. That's right! I wanted to put my feelings about Mitsuo perfectly in order. It's not like I have any regrets."

Urk. He knew that at moments like this, his heart could come to sound like that.

"I simply have no hopes as to what might happen now. That is the truth. Still... I still don't know for sure. In some ways, it's as if I were paralyzed: Though I have clearly been rejected, somehow... it all feels like a living dream."

Speaking of somebody somewhere else, and things like that, Kouko held her huge cup in her delicate hands, quietly tasting it. However, plenty of cream had stuck to her nose and to her upper lip, and when he saw it, without thinking, Banri burst out laughing. No matter how seriously she spoke, this person was rather undecided. That was a good place to be.

"...Oh, no... Something's wrong."

Kouko, pulling her mirror out of a pouch of her bag, opened it and peered at her face.

In the silvery surface, a Swarovski rose had been drawn on the faba-bean shaped mirror. In Kouko's white hand, it looked really pretty, and suited her.

When Banri pulled out the matching mirror from his back pocket and showed her, Kouko, whipped cream still stuck to the tip of her nose, laughed sneezingly like a child.

"Tada-kun, are you using it for my sake?"

"Of course. Aren't the mirrors a friendship pair?"

"I'm glad. Very much so."

That Sunday at Veloce, Kouko said so. She'd said, 'These belong to the survivors.'

The time Banri and Kouko were rescued from the training camp of that new religion, Kouko had packed virtually all of her cosmetics into her luggage. However, this one mirror escaped in her pocket, she said. And then as far as Kouko was concerned, she felt it was a symbol of her bond with Banri.

Therefore Kouko, to become better friends with Banri, made him a present: the same, matching mirror. Hearing that and understanding that he was to receive it, Banri borrowed a magic marker from a store clerk, and Kouko wrote on it. 'Remember the anniversary of our escape', it said. It wasn't any kind of consolation prize, in remembrance of unrequited love. So it was clearly stated.

While wondering again at this mirror, Banri handled it carefully, even if it wasn't appropriate for him.

Wiping her nose and mouth with pale brown paper, Kouko conquered some of the fresh whipped cream with her spoon.

"So, I said this and that thing, but in reality, it wasn't 'this'. So anyway... mm! This chocolate is just about the best... anyway, as for me, in this life, I was just able to pretend I had adjusted to it. Or rather, I had convinced myself that I was able to. Relieved, refreshed, starting to move forward in a new life, I was such a woman. I even thought so. ...So I told myself I'd become. I believed that I could do it. But from believing it too much, I eventually understood that I could not do it quite so easily. I was still not all that successful in changing myself, finding in me the remnants of that disgraceful C-3PO, somehow awful... you could say it was a shock. It was disappointing..."

"Sure seems like it", said Banri, his hand supporting his cheek, blending his sigh with Kouko's, who was also in the same attitude, cheek in hand. His left hand supported the left side of his chin, and his legs were crossed, left foot on top.

"Because after all, idealism by itself will not suddenly make you a dancer. In the worst case, even if you are truly a woman refreshed and relieved, moving forward in life, even so you might have nothing to do with Awa Odori."

"I was given proof of that today."

Kouko suddenly stood up, her high-heels clicking. She went and came back with a plastic spoon. She handed it over to Banri, saying "Here."

"This whipped cream is about the best in the world. Let's both have it."

"Th, thanks."

Let us lick up this sweet whipped cream together.

For some reason, he hesitated. But answering with unusual restraint, realizing the humor, taking her at her word, Banri scooped up a mouthful of Kouko's whipped cream. He held it in his mouth, sweetly thick, melting.

"How about it? Isn't it the best!?"

"Yes, really... super sweet. Melts in your mouth."

"Even melting it's good! Doesn't it feel like 'I live for this'!?"

"Haven't you already bought stock in Starbucks?"

"Aah! I'd even buy it all! The wonder is I haven't done it already!"

She meant, "Sharing like this is the most fun!" If you looked into Kouko's face, you realized

what she was thinking at once. She continued to stare intensely, even whimsically, from beginning to end as Banri reached the spoon out to his own cup and tasted the whipped cream. She seemed completely happy, her beautiful eyes sparkling.

Then,

"...You understand just how entirely useless I am. Even that uselessness you forgive me. Thank you. Besides behaving like a brat, just now I cried. Once again, excuse me. It seems every day I am an emotional disaster by your side..."

"A 'disaster'?"

Seeming suddenly surprised by that word, Banri looked back at Kouko. Kouko blinked as if in surprise from his expression,

"Eh? But... it's a mess, isn't it? But look, those... your memories... they aren't..."

Mumbling, he avoided the issue. He tried to lower his head as if it hurt. Geh, Banri frowned.

"No, or rather, no way. There is really no way!"

It was no joke. Just being pitied like this was meaningless. Lowering his spoon into his latte, he spoke distinctly. Although he didn't want to speak, he had to speak this once so she would know.

"Because it's not a big deal. Because I live like anyone else. Though I cannot say that there isn't anything that worries me, but normally I am not even aware of the memory loss, and it's not really a problem for me, and more than anything else, I want to be so. So, could you stop acting like you're nursing somebody pitiful and sick...!"

"But I didn't mean anything like that...! But, OK. Sure. I understand. If you say so, I won't say anything more. ...I swear by Starbucks."

As if taking an oath, Kouko placed her right hand on her cup, and lifted her left hand. OK then, watching that, Banri took a manly gulp of his slightly cooled latte. That he'd managed to not poke his face with the handle of his spoon, he didn't even realize. But,

"That reminds me, was there something between you and Linda-senpai?"

A snort escaped his nose.

"During practice, the two of you were acting a bit strange."

Stuck in such a critical place, the incredible Kaga Kouko--- the muscles of her neck beautifully stretched, waiting for his reply. He thought himself good enough a fast-talker, with a good enough poker face, to be able to steer away from this awkward topic.

But some things he simply could not say.

That it was possible that he'd gone out with Linda, his old classmate, for instance.

Though he had believed it entirely at their first meeting, in fact it wasn't so. Despite everything, she said nothing at all to him, but rather regarded him with doubt. Even if he believed that she had no reason for choosing to do things like that, he was reluctant to press her on the issue. He thought that if he wanted to preserve their current relationship as it was, he had better not allude to things like that. Far from it.

...No, wait. Nothing at all can be said, ...isn't there anything?

Looking a little towards Kouko, Banri gasped softly at his own thoughts. He wondered if it wouldn't be good idea to share this secret with Kouko.

It wasn't good to carry a mysterious secret, by himself, not sharing it. Would she not be able to understand these complicated feelings of his? Likewise the club, too. Even if something were to happen from now on, they may be able to get over it with an understanding person nearby. They'd seen each other at the point of utter desperation... in any case, he'd gone so far as to confess to her. And then he'd been rejected. At this point, what was there to hide? So now, seeing as they were friends like this, messing around side by side, licking whipped cream...

"I, I want to become like Linda-senpai. I admire her."

He was about to open his mouth, but closed it uncertainly.

OK, he let the matter drop, of course--- in only a moment, the mood had changed.

Even with their conversation lightening, their situation wasn't resolved. He wasn't going to burden her with his complicated situation; she had plenty of problems of her own.

Kouko didn't seem to be overly suspicious towards Linda. And if she held such aspirations, so much the better. Even if there was something there in his history with Linda, involving Kouko in it wasn't going to throw cold water on the relationship between the two of them.

"But look, Linda-senpai, doesn't she make you feel 'relaxed, refreshed, and having fun moving forward in life'? Don't you think so too?"

"Well... she's a good senpai. ...'Refreshing', like that, I think so too..."

"Seriously", she added.

Truly refreshing, giving the feeling that there hadn't been something in the past, 'looking forward', Banri was thinking too. Since the other day.

"She's awfully good at dancing too, she does everything really cool, and she's pretty. Wherever

she is, you get the feeling she's at the center of it. I mean, look, that former president senpai, don't you think he absolutely adored Linda-senpai?"

"...Eh? Wh, what? Why? How did the conversation jump to that...?"

"It was the mood, the mood! But I get the feeling she isn't seeing anybody. ...From the very start, has she had a boyfriend around? Is that OK? Mature as she is, you would think she'd have a ton of guys after her."

Leaving the strangely silent Banri behind, "Haah", Kouko gasped, strangely sexily. While warming both her hands with her cup, she twisted on her stool.

"What if, I were to become like Linda-senpai? Her hairstyle? Her clothing, rather unisex-style? No, that's not quite what I mean. I want to have that sort of feeling in living. Not like my current, hesistant self, but truly positive, relaxed, without criticizing, seeing what the world has to offer. I want to become like that."

Thinking vaguely, "Isn't this all about image?", but for the time being staying quiet, he listened to Kouko speaking in awe of Linda-senpai.

"If I am to be like Linda-senpai, then... I will do Awa Odori perfectly. And then I will have lots of friends at school. I will rebuild the relaxed, good relationship I had long ago with Mitsuo, without dragging along any boring parts. Jumping into a new world, meeting all sorts of people, going out anew, having fun to the fullest in a new college life with new friends. For example, being invited to a drinking party just like that. Me too, carefree, going off to have fun..."

And at about the same time it dawned on him.

"Oh, that reminds me. We've been invited. By Oka-chan. So it is, to a drinking party of course..."

Geh. Rather unlike a princess, Kouko frowned. She seemed aware that something awkward had been said, but hadn't caught more than that.

Though Banri had started to forget, he remembered once more that he ought to invite Kouko. It was the perfect opportunity. Wasn't it a chance to "rebuild a relaxed relationship with Mitsuo"? And as far as Mitsuo was concerned for the time being, it might be a good idea for there to be somewhere he could see her face.

The two childhood friends had messed up in various ways, but as far as building a normal quiet relationship, they had at one time done just fine.

"Let's do that, for sure! I'll go too, let's go together. Yana-ssan will come too!"

"Eh, eh, ...ho, hold on. As for me, though, ...as you might expect, that, not much... I've got the feeling Mitsuo doesn't want me around yet..."

"Look at that hesitation coming out. That's not allowed. Don't you want to be a woman refreshed and relaxed, like Linda-senpai? If that's the case, don't fuss about the past, unable to jump quickly into a new world."

"But! ...That ultrasonic, detestable thing!"

"I know. Nobody said anything about becoming friends with Oka-chan. Why don't we just show up, normally, and mingle with our fellow first-years? Besides, what would you do if you were Linda-senpai? Invited like that by Oka-chan, it's a once in a lifetime chance to restart your relationship. If you're a person thinking you want to move forward in life, what do you think you ought to do, Kaga-san?"

"...But..."

Her brows furrowed, Kouko looked over at Banri as if she were worried. Acting like that, requesting help from Banri with a cute face, not meeting his eyes properly, was that something she'd only recently learned?

"No 'buts'! Since neither reliance on the spirit nor anything else is working out, of course you aren't going to make a huge change in your behavior here. Don't you want to move ahead? Don't you want to become a relaxed, refreshed woman? If so, make it reality! You're going to the gathering. Because there's nothing to complain about! There's no reason not to go out! In any case, we've got nothing going on! There's no reason why we can't spend some time having fun with our fellow freshmen! With a 'Hmph!' kinda of feeling."

"...Tada-kun, do you think I have the free time...really?"

"Eh? Is there something on your schedule? Wasn't it clear?"

...Even though it was clear. In chagrin, Kouko held the whipped cream in her mouth. Grabbing her spoon with one hand and stirring her cup as if in desperation, she let out a "phew!". And then,

"...All right. As far as you've...said, shall...we...try?"

When she glanced at him sidelong in defeat, Banri nodded vigorously. Doubting it as much as he had, it seemed to him a sudden, happy development.

Already, Yana-ssan, Oka-chan, they truly had nothing to do with matters. As it was, he himself was happy. He was truly looking forward to being able to go to the party with Kouko.

To where even though she had been invited to the get-together by the hated Oka Chinami, she would come. Such a thing--- excellent, maybe there was still hope. His thoughts had gone as far as that.

They were together in the club, together dancing, lunching together; they would even be showing

up to the drinking party as a pair. Even with how stubbornly she had avoided trying or doing anything, she was coming because he had asked her. She was going out, with him only. It would become common knowledge. That felt good already, absolutely so. Even more than anything up to this point, it made him feel that things were going well.

So it is. From friendship comes affection. Isn't that the way it always is in this world? If they could be 'good friends', if he carefully built up their friendship like that, if he continued being Kouko's hoped-for perfect friend, then it would eventually work out . . . perhaps.

Even with this seemingly regretful love, he would perhaps see the day it worked out.

"What're you saying? You were only just dumped on Saturday---!" It was as if there were somebody behind him, whispering in shock; a thin, cool presence. Disregarding it as his imagination, Banri also drank from his latte. Unable to do anything else, he laughed. Things were looking up. He pulled a deep breath into his beating chest, the smell of roses next to Kouko covering his mouth.

The afternoon sunlight shining through the glass rather brightly hurt his eyes.

Chapter 3

Tada Banri was trying on blue-jeans.

And now, this old second-hand shop's cramped changing room had an overpowering smell.

There was the characteristic, detergent-like fabric-softener-like artificial floral scent. But on top of that, the fully half-tatami-sized carpeted floor reeked of the soles of unwashed male feet. As if in answer to that problem, set in the corner of the changing room was a car deodorant strong enough to kill a person, smelling of Hawaiian coconuts.

Coming from the other side of the ventilation fan there was a smell as of lunch and tobacco mixed together, and beneath it a rather unusual presence was drawing near, making itself known. Was it water in the basement? Or was it sewage? A bathroom-like smell was hidden there.

Forming a perfect blend in the confined airspace, the stagnated smells violently invaded Banri's nerves and mine by way of the mucous membranes of our noses. Feeling like the time we had that awful car sickness, our heads hurting and getting dizzy, our stomachs squeezed out from top to bottom like cleaning rags. We could've thrown up, really.

Though it was bad for a customer staying only a short time, didn't the employees think about it at all? Were their noses broken and numbed already? No, they must've thought it stank, else why the Hawaiian coconuts? But this thing's sickly-sweet, strong smell was on the edge of being dangerous, and in fact was the worst offender.

Enduring all this in bad humor, anyhow I quietly stood in the corner of the changing room, watching Banri changing, not all that impressed.

Staying like this, motionless, in the upper corner by the ceiling, I felt as if I were being sucked, as if hypnotized, into that notably gloomy, dark-looking shadow. And then clinging to it, as if I'd become stuck there.

To say that I think of myself as a ghost, in short this place, is haunted...

"...Zzu! ...Uoe...!"

Pulling on the cheap, 1600 yen blue-jeans, Banri looked down for a moment at the troublesome front buttons. He started to get nauseous from the overwhelming smell, which turned into a fit of coughing, and swallowing back something acid. It seemed somehow too much.

From the other side of the closed curtains, "How do they feel?", the store clerk was asking pointedly. In a panic, Banri fastened all the buttons, opened the curtain, and slipped on the shoes he'd left outside the changing room. He still wasn't wearing the New Balance shoes that Linda had given him. Today it was the same old Jack Purcells again.

Banri and I turned and left the narrow space together, taking the deepest breaths they could. I could not, since I am a spirit that people cannot see, but the store clerk was able to tend to the material Banri. Trying to be as quiet as possible, he was breathing desperately through his mouth.

The store clerk fawned over him, making little flattering noises as she squatted and fiddled around with the pant's cuffs appreciatively. Looking at Banri in a flattering way, her hostess-like done-up hair swaying, saying things like "Heeyy? Isn't that just right!? Look, the style looks good on you!", using no more volume than necessary for her compliments to be heard.

And yet, if I say so myself, the image of Banri in the mirror was certainly more than ever recklessly stylish. Even his legs looked longer and slimmer.

"Hey, you're right!" said Banri, slightly blue in the face, laughing foolishly as he turned around, confirming that his rear end was settling in nicely. It looked better than any other blue-jeans he had right now, so he muttered, "Why not go for this one?"

Banri, for the sake of the first-year's drinking party hosted by Oka Chinami tomorrow night, was out picking up some new duds.

Embarrassed to the breaking point, he didn't notice that the changing room mirror was one of

those trick ones, reflecting only a narrow image.

The store clerk, making sure to not stand in front of the mirror (because the difference from reality would be revealed to the customer), immediately began trying to adjust the height of the bottom hem, rolling it up and down. When she told him that there was no need to bring up the hem, Banri said, "Well then, I'll go with this. I'll go take them off.", and once more closed the changing room curtain.

It seemed that he was completely decided to buy it. Well, the reflection in the mirror was good, and they were simple straight pants. Besides, what surprises would there be for 1600 yen? There wasn't too much funny stitching or extra stuff.

But that was often the case. He had spotted some blue-jeans that felt right in one of the used clothing shop's carts, but when he took them out and spread them, the upper legs had cheesy chinese-style tiger striped embroidery. The side seams were completely covered, from top to bottom, with some strange Tyrolean tape.

It was only through the magic mirror that he looked so stylish, but everything considered, you could call this a success. It's OK, Banri, go ahead and buy it. Through the mirror, I flashed Banri an OK sign.

Banri, looking pleased with himself, unfastened the buttons and was about to take off the pants, but suddenly he stopped moving. His underwear showing in the half-dressed style--- if somebody were to see him they wouldn't be pleased: the frozen figure of a young man bent over. It seemed he was looking at a seam between the legs, inside the taken-off blue-jeans.

Peeking from behind, wondering what he was worried about, at that moment, a shiver ran up my spine. This, for sure...

Right there, in the middle, around the stitching. Right between the legs, in the butt-crack, right in that area. Strangely the whole area, black perhaps, or maybe brown, a stain of a questionable color had not been fully removed.

At that spot only, for some reason or other... I don't want to say, for some reason... That, of course, to put it simply, what would you call it?

"What's this here?", he asked the store clerk from earlier. I myself thought, "He ought to point out how bad the damage is." If he could talk them into keeping it at the store and, without fail, removing the stain for him, that would be lucky for him. If that didn't work, then of course he could just stop, but that's OK, I think. It didn't need to be hemmed, and the style looked good even if it was a trick mirror.

However Banri was still looking motionlessly at the seam, thinking about something in a half-dressed style, in lack of movement thinking it through. "What's wrong? If you're worried speak up, otherwise stop it!", I nagged him from behind like that, but Banri didn't notice. He didn't

move. He must've been confused as to whether to buy it as it was, or what. "If you're confused, stop it! Get it over with!", I kept beating him over the back.

Of course, Banri didn't notice it at all. Hmm... he frowned, his head tilted as he thought it through. He was completely silenced by the trap of the changing room mirror. "Stop it already!" It was at that moment that he was pushed rather hard on the back.

"Ah, ah, ah...!"

...By reflex, even if I was only a ghost behind him, I covered my eyes against the disaster.

It was a coincidence. Absolutely. I wasn't responsible for the push. Really.

Banri, unsteady on his feet, his balance destroyed, hopping on one foot, his rear exposed, jumped out from the changing room curtain into the bright store--- and said it. Said it completely. Whoa. Wh, ooaaaa...

...But, he was saved by there not being any other customers around. Still on one foot, he ran rather forcefully into the store clerk from before, standing nearby. As it was, supported by her as if in her embrace, at least he didn't fall down.

Excuse me... sorry... moaning feverishly, Banri, his rear exposed, ashamed, ran in his socks back into the changing room.

As a human being, so far, getting embarrassed, blushing and so forth, were things he seemed to encounter every step of the way. Banri, his face strangely darkened, took off the jeans in the blink of an eye. He took them off as fast as if they were on fire. Too quick to see, he gathered his stuff and went to the register. And then,

"This please! Do, ...does it show...!?"

With a terrible expression, he timidly asked the store clerk. He could see several security cameras watching over the store, protecting it from shoplifters. The clerk accepted his money as if nothing had happened, and gave him a receipt. While she folded the jeans with practiced hands, with a very small voice she said, "Eh? Black." Looking at him kindly, she smiled a bit and said, "I didn't see anything. Here you go." He had thought her a flattering salesperson, but then not understanding well what she said, his heart now thought of her as an angel. I'm sorry, store. Please excuse me, seriously. But the smell and everything else spoke thoroughly bad of you.

Taking the bag Banri bowed, and ran at full speed up the stairs to the store's open door. Going out to the street like that, he dashed even harder. He was fleeing. I saw that the strange things that had just happened had already disappeared from his brain.

At that moment his cell-phone rang, and he flipped it open as he ran.

"Hello, hellooo?", a woman's voice, sounding slightly nasal due to the telephone.

'You already done with your errands? As for me, right now I'm almost done at the hairdresser!'

From a different place in the same neighborhood, it was Kaga Kouko talking to him. After the third period lecture, Banri and Kouko met up at the same entrance as always, took the train and came here together. In order to tend to their various errands, they waved and separated at the crosswalk, the two of them to meet up again afterwards. Kouko to her favorite beauty parlor, Banri to the area around the second-hand shop that Mitsuo had shown him earlier.

"I'm done too! ...Some, some things happened... but anyway I'm done! You mean, you got your hair trimmed, perhaps?"

'No, just a treatment. Did you buy anything?'

"I bought some jeans! Well, I'm at the next intersection! See you shortly!"

Gasping as he said it, Banri stood waiting at the red light of a pedestrian crossing. Combing up his bangs, which had fallen to his eyes, he took a deep breath. Understood, I'll be right there too, she'd answered, breaking the connection.

Banri's cheeks were flushed red as if overflowing with blood, his temples, sweating lightly. In that corner of the twilit town, it looked like he was glittering.

With a little cough, Banri stuck his cell-phone in his back pocket, and put the bag from the second-hand shop back under his arm.

All he knew was that his heart was beating hard, to the point where you could see it through his shirt. It must've been the memory of his super huge embarrassment, plus a bit of running, and then the promise to go have tea with Kaga Kouko. And whatever else, without a doubt they'd head off to her beloved Starbucks again.

Within this past week, how many times with the same companion to the same Starbucks, had he drunk the same latte shot (sometimes fresh ground real drip coffee)? Talking about lectures during club time, talking about things to eat, talking about jokes they'd seen online, talking about magazines piled up in stores... It was like they'd been going around for weeks all over the place, in a repeating loop, having fun, like those girls that gather together to feel more secure. But at long last, the time to go out had come, and wasn't it about time to do something else? Hadn't it been a while since they last went to Veloce? Were things like that nothing?

Well, wherever they drank tea, whatever they talked about, such things, as far as Banri was concerned they didn't really matter. Meeting up as students, going to lecture together, drinking tea, gossiping, texting, walking side by side, going out for a while--- in such a loop, more and more, Banri was finding meaning. Repeating so many times it built up, the very thing itself was becoming important. That was how I saw it.

In his daydreams, from the very bottom of his heart, Banri innocently believed that someday,

this 'loop of everyday bonding between friends' would eventually become something else. Without a doubt, genuinely.

For that reason, he innocently continued going around. Repeating it to that extent, Banri believed it reinforced the connection, and that his hope was taking shape and drawing nearer to him. He was convinced, with a child-like fastidiousness, that if he forced the emotions, it would all come to nothing.

As for me, I directed my attention to the cars passing to and fro.

Even Tokyo’s spring was already ending.

The air was warmly humid.

As if spreading over the city night, the store windows twinkled like stars. Even the cell-phones of the people passing by, the candles decorating the cafe entrances, the LEDs decorating the shrubbery, and even headlights stretched out like rivers. All the lights were too bright, dizzying to the eyes.

He couldn’t see the intersection where they were to meet from here. Of course, he couldn’t see Kaga Kouko nor anything like her either. Though they may be in the same town, to me it seems the two of them are very far apart. Would they really be able to meet up ‘shortly’?

Besides, Banri still hasn’t started moving forward.

The red light is shining.

We’re standing side by side, still impatiently shuffling our feet.

* * *

They said the reservation was from 5pm.

Banri thought they were starting rather early, but Oka-chan had insisted in her anime voice, "But we have all we can drink for three hours, five to eight, for only 1000 yen!" But the round of food added another 1000 yen. Since it was a chain tavern with a huge billboard hung near the college, and it was right along the main street, everybody should have known how to get there.

As four-thirty came and went, Banri watched the noisy students going back and forth expectantly. His hands stuffed into the back pockets of his new blue-jeans, the time slowly coming, looking around restlessly,

"Look here, Tada Banri!"

Slapped on the shoulder firmly from behind, he turned around.

"Oh!", he laughed, grabbing each other's elbows playfully. It was Mr. Two Dimensions. They were meeting up here after the end of classes. Banri and Mitsuo had invited him too, having arranged to go together from here to the drinking party.

Like Banri, Mr. Two Dimensions had not been to any drinking parties apart from those for club recruiting when they'd first started, and was going to enjoy himself today. If he were, even a little, one of those guys who believed the currently popular saying that goes like 'guys who can skillfully build multifaceted relationships in their lives gain the victory', then he could not let an opportunity like this slip away.

Immediately after Banri had reported breathlessly "I bought jeans specially for the drinking party!", he too sallied forth to the fashionable streets of Shimokitazawa~ Daikanyama area. Now dressed like a preppy, he wore a slim collared shirt, the spoils of his battle.

"Hey Mr. Two Dimensions, that's a nice shirt you're wearing!"

"Heh heh heh! And your jeans, they're what you bought. They look good."

"Though they looked better when I looked at them in the changing room. I mean, does it look in good shape? Tonight the drinks're gonna be dirt cheap; it might even be methyl alcohol. Will it give us hangovers?"

"I have everything perfectly arranged, of course, though it'd be good to use the hand sanitizer now. You can even use formalin. Ah, for the time being, shouldn't we stop by a convenience store before we get there? You might want to have a energy drink."

"It's OK, I'm coating my stomach lining with milk. I mean... eh? Though I only just noticed, is there something about you today that's cooler than usual?

"Oh, this? You've noticed?"

Mr. Two Dimensions, recently graduated from two to three dimensions, but still validating this three-dimensional world, stood out rather conspicuously, combing his silky hair with his fingers as if he were showing it off.

"Actually, it's been dyed a bit. Was it ash pink beige? Or was it golden brown? Or was it some sort of mixture? Anyway it was applied to me. For a three dimensional effect? So I was told, somehow or other."

"Really!? Eh, for today's drinking party!? You went that far!? Whoa, what? Are you really trying to make it in three dimensions!?"

"You got it wrong! This was by chance! Are you trying to mess with my head!? What do you mean by 'making it in three dimensions'!?"

"Eh, ah, sorry..."

"If you understand, then watch your mouth! In words, Lady Word-Power (Spirit Clan, Servant Class, Long Black Hair, Blue Eyes, Little Girl, Genius, Shelters from the rain under Eddoe leaves, Quiet except when Exercised – Super Bookworm) is a living being! Besides, I've received my bride from the best of the two dimensional world! It's a matter of believing!"

"Really, I'm sorry..."

"OK then! Don't worry about it, things like that really do happen. I, my sister had, an acquaintence now working as a hairdresser. I was told she would 'be practicing hair-coloring'. ...Honestly, how is it? Though it seemed she hardly knew what she was doing."

"Don't worry about it. I understand, I understand, coloring it like that looks cool. Hey, how about this coloring..."

"Have you ever done it?"

"No, no. I don't think so. We didn't do things like that in Shizuoka."

"You liar! You've even got Gundam deployed down there. It has military strength comparable to what they have at Tokyo Big Sight (in case of emergency, it transforms into a robot!)"

"Hmm, I heard the gundam was out there, but the big white fellow doesn't help out with the tea leaves."

"They used the general appearance from Turn A. So I heard. Myself."

Mr. Two Dimensions, laughing in amusement, pulled out an iPhone from a stylish, diagonally hanging leather bag. His touch on it was quite practiced. The cover, though made to resemble Ayanami's plug suit, if one were to close their eyes, in it's long and slender style it became Kanaka-sama.

He called himself Mr. Two Dimensions, and boasted of having no interest in three dimensional things, but even he brought more or less good sense with him. His real name, Satou Takaya. Tall and slim, always wearing glasses, apart from the pink and purple, his clothing was stylish; even his hair was neatly combed back. Easy to get along with, he really was a good fellow.

"It's a message from Yana-ssan. He got summoned by the student affairs office and says to go on ahead. Let's do like he said. Move it!"

"Ah, wait a bit more. Actually, there's another person I'm waiting for here. Kaga-san's coming."

"Eh!? Kaga-san!? ...That one!?"

While fluttering both hands in the air, miming the volume of her hair, "Oof!", he smiled, his eyes open like saucers. Well, he understood what he meant to say.

"Yes. That Kaga-san."

"...But, here!? I mean... that, that 'lady', coming out to a common drinking party!?"

"She's coming, she's coming. It looks like she likes to drink sake. Didn't she drink with you and me that time, up in the mountains... when we all went out, to that seminar of the Crystal God."

"But we didn't drink even a drop that time! I mean, eh, aren't you getting along rather nice!? Thinking about it, didn't you tell me you'd gone together to Sendagaya for dinner just like that!? What's more, you even joined a club together! Hey, what gives!? What's going on!? What is it!? Are you trying to explode!?"

"But we're still friends. As for our relationship, Kaga-san and I, it's like 'Sex'!"

And the city!

Catching the thought, Banri flashed a smile from ear to ear, put his hand on his hip in a girlish pose and called out. Mr. Two Dimensions gave him a rough tsukkomi chop to the side, telling him to cut it out.

"I mean, no way... but Kaga-san... look here. Before, all that about Yana-ssan, didn't we talk about it? How'd that turn out? Wasn't there something even Banri said before, that Kaga-san wanted to get married, kinda sneaking off, but Yana-ssan clearly rejected her, and dumped her, there was this and that gossip about it..."

"What kinds of gossip?"

From behind them, there arose the light, sweet smell of roses.

"Waah!", Mr. Two Dimensions jumped back, and Banri turned around awkwardly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Tada-kun. Long time, no see, Mr. Two Dimensions."

---Well then. The fact that Banri had been talking with Mr. Two Dimensions about Kouko and Mitsuo had been easily discovered.

He didn't know what Kouko was thinking inside, but for now with her ever-perfect smile,

"I don't care if it was about Mitsuo and I. We were simply childhood friends. And now not even outsiders; we don't know each other. That's all there is to it."

Still, such things were being said.

And then, smiling, she became the magnificent queen of roses.

In the overwhelming glare of Kouko's entrance, whether Mr. Two Dimensions was listening to what she said or not, he seemed to be at a loss for words, standing at attention, watching her in fascination. He wasn't the only one: the other students gathered there in the hall had suddenly fallen silent too, turning towards them in ones and twos, their gazes riveted, as it were, on the glittering Kouko.

Fuller than ever, her extravagantly curled, dark brown, long hair shone beautifully, the result of the treatment the other day. Her smooth satin Katyusha was a noble jet black.

Her pearly white skin perfectly made up, she wore a crimson lipstick, deeper even than blood.

By her sparkling eyes, light grey eye shadow gleamed, tinged with sorrow. In the shadow of her delicate collarbones, there was a tight diamond necklace in the form of a key, swaying and throwing flashes of light all over.

While casually covering for Mr. Two Dimensions, nervous from how gorgeous she was, Banri also,

"...Wh, why did you dress up so incredibly stylish today, Kaga-san?"

Aren't you so incredibly, awfully pretty! ---So much so, it took him straight to sighing. She wasn't a foreigner, though that was not something he could come out and say.

"Eh? It's just ordinary stuff, the usual."

Kouko said that, but she was wearing earrings, and a ring on her middle finger too, with large diamonds sparkling in the shape of a flower. Her black high-heels were plainly works of art. The backs of her calves drawing elegant curves, distinctly beautiful all the way to the line of her ankles. Her heels were close to four inches high. Unfortunately, she wasn't bare-legged. She was wearing the black tights again today. He wondered if the snake-bite wasn't fully healed.

Her ahead-of-the-season short-sleeve mini-dress had the chest open deeply, and a bold white to gray gradation. With a layered feminine design of shiny crumpled silk, it had a high waist, just under her chest, looking as if she were being squeezed by a large ribbon. The sudden contrast from chest to waist gave emphasis at just the right point.

Kouko was so perfect, it took his breath away.

It didn't fit for such as her to be hanging around in a college student hall like this. It was a waste. It would have suited her better to be in the gorgeous lounge of a high class hotel, with a cocktail. Without question.

"So it is with you, too: you didn't wear your new blue-jeans. And the shoes from Linda-senpai? I was wondering if you'd worn them yet."

"I thought about wearing them, but then considered the risk and changed my mind. That even though the blue-jeans were used, and their being dirty would be OK. Rather, Kaga-san, are you okay with drinking sake today?"

"What are you saying, isn't it a drinking party? Haven't we decided to go drinking!?"

"No, look, your legs. Since you're still wearing tights, it might be a good idea if you restrained yourself. Hey, Mr. Two Dimensions, this person was bitten by a snake in her own garden! Isn't that awful?"

"Come back to reality!", Banri elbowed Mr. Two Dimensions, his eyes were half closed in abstraction. "Huh?", Mr. Two Dimensions eyes opened,

"Eh...? Sn, snake? Really? Kaga-san, where do you live?"

"In Tokyo. Resident of Minato Ward."

"A snake in Minato!? Wow! Come now, in the city center, apart from a lot of green, so to speak... was it a Green General? Or perhaps a Tiger Keelback? Thought it might be a recently escaped former pet, like something they import from foreign countries now and then."

Kouko, her eyes full of sadness, shook her head 'no' at Mr. Two Dimensions.

"That I don't know. Long, dark, rather macho... because it attacked our cat, anyway, in a haze, I already separated them. I've gotten used to the feeling of the leg injury now."

With the superior air of a magician, she opened her bag and pulled out a handkerchief. Spreading it wide, she showed the pattern on one side to the two guys.

On that blue and yellow curved surface there was depicted a bold, vivid design, certainly what he had seen the other day on Kouko's calf, and which perhaps represented the current condition of it. ...Which Banri understood, but Mr. Two Dimensions probably had no clue as to what it was. "Huh?", he said, looking at the handkerchief while tilting his head to one side in confusion.

"Tada-kun, this is Emilio Pucci. It looks rather like pretty bad internal bleeding. But it looks like it isn't festering, and if properly disinfected it will clear up soon enough."

"Really? If so that's good, but did you go to the hospital after all?"

"At home, since our house functions as a clinic. Even my mother, as a doctor, took a look at it for me."

"Hey, so that's how it is. I see, a hospital. Some sort of arrangement, as you would expect:

rather like a princess. Your mother, for sure, wasn't she worried?"

"It was like, 'Soo lame, you're an idiot, aren't youu?'"

At that crude way of speaking, Mr. Two Dimensions and Banri both broke out laughing. Kouko, however, looking around restlessly,

"By the way, hey, umm, ...what about Mitsuo? Didn't he say he was coming?"

"Ah, he may be a little delayed. And so, I want to stop by a convenience store beforehand."

Hearing Banri's reply, her lightly sparkling eyelids lowered a bit.

"That so", she nodded, that voice. So light he couldn't hear her, Banri put his ear near to Kouko's mouth. That way what he heard was,

"...But afterwards he's coming straight over."

The way she said it confirmed it for him.

Suddenly Banri was at a loss for words. Looking down at Kouko's white face, time stopped.

Or something like that.

He had stopped thinking. He felt as if cold water had suddenly been poured down his neck.

He thought she was participating because she had been invited by him. Did that mean... that perhaps, it wasn't so? Because Yanagisawa Mitsuo was coming, she thought to come too...? Was it something like that?

A cloud of suspicion descended suddenly over his heart. Caught up in the moment, understanding things to his own convenience, in reality, was there even one thing he should have expected...? Looking forward to enjoying himself to the point where he had gotten himself new jeans, was he, perhaps, a clown?

No, no no no. Forget it. Banri, confused, shook his head. He cleared from his mind the awful thoughts that were strangely, distinctly coming to the fore. Because from this point, the long awaited, fun drinking party was starting. He wasn't supposed to darken it by dragging in his own imaginary problems.

Besides, such things didn't matter, did they? Yana-ssan was coming too, that was what he'd said for sure. He even hoped that Kouko and Mitsuo might be able to make up. In general, unless there weren't enough showing up, people normally wouldn't even worry.

Above all, that was so. He had no room for 'normally'. For now, Kouko was certainly fixed on the idea that she would have a relaxed chat with Mitsuo, the first in a long time. Now that he

thought about it, it was only natural, and she was probably preparing her heart for it. If he saw himself as her friend, then understanding such things he had to help her.

In his mind, Banri was able to understand it all perfectly.

But in heart, it didn't work too well. His voice too was stopped, and suddenly instead of speaking for him, Mr. Two Dimensions spoke to Kouko.

"If Yana-ssan knows where the place is, won't he come right away? It's OK! He'll be out soon, amongst other things, he went to get something from the convenience store for while we're drinking sake. It'll be something I want to drink, for sure. Banri's going to coat his stomach with milk. How about you, Kaga-san?"

Kouko looked up at the amiable Mr. Two Dimensions, cutely touching her finger to her chin and tilting her head to the side. "Well then, I suppose I might have some milk too."

Saying that beside Banri, she smiled wonderfully, like a rose blossom.

* * *

"Wow! Is this what your drinking parties always look like!?"

Putting his shoes into the rack and coming up to the tatami floor, Mr. Two Dimensions raised his voice. Following right after him, Banri was equally surprised.

The room was rather large and formal, partitioned off by a sliding screen, and was being occupied by so many noisy first-year students he imagined he was going to go deaf.

"Whoa... so many people came! Man, more than I ever thought would come..."

"Eh, what's going on?"

Suddenly from behind Banri, Kouko appeared, and at the same time a great burst of laughter arose from the group. At the noise, the three of them together covered their ears.

"By chance, the whole department wouldn't have shown up...?"

It was still a bit earlier than when the gathering should have been. But already, it looked like there were easily forty or fifty people gathered already. "And there will probably be more guys coming", muttered Kouko in what was probably not quite a joke.

Chinami, if he remembered correctly, had said 'I'm going to try and call and invite a few girls I

know.' 'So if there's anybody else you want to invite, call them!' 'Everybody, If you want to make friends, it'll be fun!', and so on.

What Banri had imagined from the way she talked: ten people at most, perhaps a few more, a friendly get-together of acquaintances only.

"A... anyways, let's reserve our spot! Mr. Two Dimensions, the place over in the corner by the door is still open! We should take it! Look! Let's go, Kaga-san too!"

As soon as she saw the room crowded with people, Kouko seemed to get nervous, but pushing on her back steadily, the three of them in a line somehow slipped in, their backs to the sliding door, to a spot with four cushions placed near the end of the table. At that moment, from a bunch of guys seated nearby, "It, it's that beautiful girl...!" "What do I say if she comes here!?" "Talk to her, talk to her!" "No way no way no way no way no way!" ---He heard them say, talking amongst themselves while glancing towards Kouko. Kouko uncomfortably pretended not to hear, and kept herself close to Banri, trying to shrink into his shadow.

Banri would try to say something to Kouko, but at such times the guys close by would break out laughing loudly, and Banri's voice like dust was drowned out entirely. And then, from here and there a voice calling somebody, or already rising voices in conversation, again loud laughter, a voice flying high, speaking at full volume into a cell-phone, "Eh!? I can't hear well!", overwhelmed by the sheer noise, his mouth would not even open.

Somehow or other, it appeared they were already late getting started. The three of them still silent, looking at each other without thinking,

"Ah, Banri came! Even though it's sudden, excuse me, but why don't you come over to this table!?"

Particularly piercing, a high voice like something coming from a young girl in an anime reached his ears.

The tiny Oka Chinami carried some huge pitchers of beer she'd gotten from one of the employees, coming towards them, dangerously unsteady on her feet.

"Ooooka-chan! Watch out, watch out! You're overdoing it, just one at a time!"

In a hurry, Banri reached out, putting the pitchers on the table for a moment. Turning to Mr. Two Dimensions, he had him pass some to the guys at the next table. Chinami, waving both her small hands in the air,

"Wow they were heavy! And super cold! I mean, this time while I was talking they even gave me a uulong! Could you line them up in the same place!? Yes, yes, like that, thank you!"

Once more, she took a big breath.

She was dressed in the style of a busy organizer, in slender blue-jeans and a simple T-shirt, with a small nylon bag hung at a slant, somewhat randomly. Chinami, facing Banri on the edge of her cushion, gathered herself quietly and sat. Like that, her eyes sparkled as if they were stars singing. When she roughly removed the rubber-band that tied her hair up closely, her black hair fell softly to well beneath her delicate shoulders. With great care combing that lovely hair to fall over one shoulder,

"I give up already! Look at this, all these people! I talked to a few friends, then more people showed up than I thought. In the end, we turned out to be such a big family!"

"I'm in a panic", she said, laughing like a little kid.

Banri was practically in shock, seeing how cute she was even in all the disorder of this evening.

"Three cheers for the organizer! Was it hard by yourself?"

"With help here and there from everybody, we got to this point. I'm doing fine! But I might need a hand again, even from Banri."

"Whatever you say! Coming here just now, we were just surprised that more came than we thought. Mr. Two Dimensions came here today with me. Mr. Two Dimensions, this is Oka-chan. She and Yana-ssan do film studies together."

He introduced Mr. Two Dimensions, next to him, to Chinami. Chinami yelped "Yay!", raising one hand high.

"G-day, Mr. Two Dimensions! Let's drink too much today! Here, gimme five, gimme five!"

"A, gu, g-day...! Ca, call me if you need any help from me! He he, gimme five!"

Mr. Two Dimensions started talking, and gave her a high five. He did it with such feeling it made a good sound. With her masterful friendliness, Chinami giving back even one touch was 'wonderful'.

Right away, Mr. Two Dimensions, gazing happily at the hand touched by Chinami, broke into a foolish grin, going into meltdown mode, as if before him stretched the tracks of the Galaxy Railway, rising up through the dimensions. Hey, Mr. Two Dimensions! This is three dimensions! Steady yourself! 'He's died!', Banri poking him still with his elbow.

Chinami, once more favoring even Kouko with a smile,

"Kaga-san, thanks for coming out! I'm really happy you did! Let's enjoy drinking!"

Her bravery was All-American in its passion. She lifted her hand the same way she'd saluted Mr. Two Dimensions with a high five, but,

"..."

Of course, Kaga Kouko was as motionless as a mountain. Her expression turning towards annoyance, she pointed her chin the other way. This time poking Kouko's elbow, Banri,

"...Weren't you going to have fun in a new world, moving forward, everything a-gogo? What would you do if you were Linda-senpai?"

The smell of roses sickly-sweet, he tried to whisper it softly close to her ear. Saying "if you were Linda-senpai" had recently become the #1 most effective hot button for her.

Kouko, seething, tightened her lips into a straight line, but still, something,

"...mpf!"

She decided to strike--- no, to give her a high-five. Crack! The sound of the harsh impact echoed. Chinami, still kneeling formally, closed her eyes. The impact reached all the way from the palm of her hand to her shoulder.

Now now now, Banri inserted himself between them, following after Kouko in giving Chinami's small hand a high-five. A relatively nice sound came forth.

"I mean, Oka-chan, you going to put your stuff down? Over on that seat?"

"N no no... I'm on the floor because I can't reserve a spot. Because until the drinking starts, it's not appropriate for me to sit down. Besides, because this bag is super important I cannot let it out of my hands."

"A treasure? A cell-phone or something?"

Chinami grinned impishly, showing her little front teeth. Just then from a little ways away, somebody called out, "Chinamii! Your cell-phone is ringing!", and they understood from that that her cell-phone wasn't in the bag.

"Afterwards I plan on seeing even you. Have fun! See ya!"

Just like that, she got up lightly and flew off towards where the call came from. Thereupon all at once here and there hands waved, names were called, telling her somebody had arrived or somebody was arriving, and Chinami never did quite reach her cell-phone. With her tiny form moving around, chatting with everyone, laughing at everything, she really did look busy.

While for some reason watching the situation, Mr. Two Dimensions muttered.

"...I mean, Oka Chinami-chan's face is awfully cute... or not. Her face, isn't it wide? Might she be from the north?"

According to Mitsuo's sources, she was certainly from one of the metropolitan high schools. Mr. Two Dimensions, when told so by Banri, gave a strange sigh.

"Then of course she's incredible. Just by her communications skills. Me, I'm just a stupid guy who doesn't talk. Are these friends of yours, Banri?"

Banri looked around the area for a bit too,

"I don't really know them either. A few I know... ah, those girls might have said something about tennis club while they were drinking... or something like that. You guys have nearly always 'hung around' with Yana-ssan from the start. Kaga-san, how about you?"

Though maybe he shouldn't have asked.

Not answering Banri's question, Kouko sat formally in that too-noisy place, looking uncomfortable.

"...What's this 'Welcome to my drinking party! Come join my group!' feeling?"

With great difficulty, her beautifully made up face was being forced into a sullen pout. Mr. Two Dimensions, briefly seeing Kouko that way, didn't scold her,

"So it would seem, more and more."

Without hesitating, he elaborated.

"In short, Oka Chinami-chan is the connection between everybody. If I were suddenly told I would be managing a party, I absolutely would never be able to gather people like that. Our current 'situation', is that we've been 'granted' the chance to be part of a huge group, with Oka Chinami-chan at the center, it seems."

What Mr. Two Dimensions said certainly seemed likely, and Banri had no choice but to nod deeply also.

"Sure seems like it. I mean, I simply don't have the self-confidence to go around asking people, 'Let's have a party!' Looking lonely, seeming alone, sitting by myself, saying 'Ah, somebody else is coming now!' and so forth to the waiters in apology while talking like crazy on the cell-phone, but not finding anybody else... it seems. ...I wonder how it is that Oka-chan made so many acquaintances in only one month?"

"...Though we're all human beings of the same year, going through the same clubs with the same students, what the heck is the difference...?"

Kouko's muttering trailing off into silence, though not in the mood, the three of them nonetheless surveyed the wide room.

Though there had been no toasts yet, the noisy merry-making students' faces, faces and more faces.

Every one of them, complete strangers, even their names unknown. Something that in one breath could easily be spread around, even if they never met again.

Nothing but such people, this world...

"Shall we not bind ourselves in an alliance?"

The one who had opened his mouth just now was Mr. Two Dimensions. Looking at Banri's and Kouko's faces while lowering his voice as if to escape from the tumult,

"If by any chance it happens that one of us has to organize a party or something like that, always, no matter what, we all need to attend. That way, there will absolutely be at least three people able to get together. The organizer will never get lonely. ...How about it? I will swear. The day before yesterday I completed writing, from first to last, an original near-future novel about beautiful female armored cavalry, 'Blood and Iron Girls! ~We are the ones~'. By those 347 kilobytes I swear."

He reached his hand out under the table.

Immediately Banri put his own hand over that hand.

"I'm on board. Then as for me, 'BBQ_LOVE'... by this password that I have used for nearly all situations I swear. E-mail, internet, browsing sites, and all such things, from the time of eight-letter names always that. If I betray you, then do likewise to me."

Kouko, also, put her white hand on top of the others,

"As for me, well, because I just swore by Starbucks, this time I will swear by Tiffany's. My life up til now, my life from now on, everything related to me should be glittering in the sunshine, but alone in the world I am blue."

While she swore, she touched the key-shaped diamond necklace with one hand.

"Well then, all together!", together on Mr. Two Dimensions word, their combined hands bounced up once and then separated vigorously.

And then, the three of them laughed secretly.

It somehow felt like a secret society, a bit fun, very much like being henchmen. Nonetheless, as far as Banri was concerned, he wanted Mitsuo to be a part of the company. If it were only Mr. Two Dimensions, then clearly they would approve of it, but he wondered, how would Kouko be with it?

He was about ready to propose it when at that moment,

"Banri! Mr. Two Dimensions! My bad, I'm late!"

At the entrance to the room a tall figure appeared. Mitsuo was tearing off his knit cap while waving towards them.

He saw Banri waving back at him, but suddenly Mitsuo's hand stopped moving. He wondered if he had noticed Kouko sitting next to him. That Kouko was supposed to be coming to the party also, in truth he hadn't yet told Mitsuo.

When everybody was making arrangements back in the student hall, at that time, "Today they'll surely be on good terms", was the extent of his plans. He thought so even before Chinami or anybody could put anything in his ears. But it seemed that was not to be. ...By e-mail or any other way, it would have been better to say something, of course. Advising him beforehand, even telling him strangely, "Well, I can't say!", he thought. Just then.

Kouko too looked over towards Mitsuo, but presently, for some reason, she looked over towards Banri. Being looked at too was embarrassing. Mitsuo, continuing further in, said "since I've come this far, I'm coming in" to those around, and advanced into the room. Saying "Sorry, coming through", as he passed behind some people, he came closer.

"Yana-ssan, well, eh, why don't you sit down there for now."

Banri quietly indicated a cushion he'd reserved for Mitsuo. He was wondering about what he'd do if he said something childish like "If she's here, I'm going back!"

"...Oh"

Surprisingly obediently, Mitsuo came and sat next to Mr. Two Dimensions. Mr. Two Dimensions and Mitsuo exchanged tentative "Hey dude!" and so on, smiling, trying to hide the strange mood. Before long, the slightly uncomfortable Mr. Two Dimensions looked down, hiding what was left of his smile.

Kouko also looked tense, her body gone stiff, still silent and pretending not to notice.

"...You invited her?"

With a voice as if giving a small sigh, Mitsuo asked him. Only barely able to act as if it were nothing, Banri answered brightly.

"No, Oka-chan got her first. Then, well, I asked her if she'd come with me."

"...That so? For sure you guys were friends from a previous existence."

Saying, "Well, it seems like that. Hey, today's fun!" and nodding, while in fact Banri couldn't

look over towards Kouko. What sort of face is Kouko making right now, he wondered. What could he do about this awkwardness? The way things were arranged was too bad. That the atmosphere had become like this was perhaps his own fault.

For the time being, he felt it better that the sake came quickly. Even if they only had a toast, then afterwards by it's influence, things would work out. Maybe.

"Ah, Yana! Already, you finally came! You said you'd help me prepare, but you're late!"

Chinami grinned at Mitsuo over the people heads as she worked restlessly. Mitsuo's eyes suddenly lit up and he stood halfway, putting both his hands to his face in a cute way not at all like him. He never showed a face like that for me... thought Banri, unconsciously looking up to that face smiling so brightly.

"Chinami! Sorry, forgive me!"

"Really now, I've been waiting for the toasts! Well before long, because time is passing, the toasts... or rather aren't there enough mugs of beer to go around!? Hey already, pass them around! Whether you pour your own drink or whatever, for now move it move it move iiittt!"

Chinami, like a little mouse, was all in a panic setting order to everybody's confusion. From trays lined up under the tables, mugs of beer were being passed around from hand to hand, from guys near at the hand to the pitchers of beer and oolong tea, things were moving along at a proper speed.

Reaching out his hand, Banri accepted mugs of beer, one after another, from the stranger next to him and passed them on. Put in place, for the time being within reach of Kouko, Mr. Two Dimensions, Mitsuo and himself, and yet one more, passed along "Last!"

"Ah, that's too many! We've all got ours here!"

"Eh? I thought there was one more. I must've miscalculated."

Towards some voices calling from afar, "It hasn't gotten here", yet more mugs were passed down.

In that way, everybody was quickly handed things to drink, with "For me an uulong would be fine", "Please pass that beer back here!" and so forth as the final adjustments were made.

"Everything handed out!? Everybody's here, right!? Everything's ready, organizer! Oka Chinami! Let the party begin!"

Even standing Chinami wasn't that tall, and her beer mug was bigger than her face. Saying "Way to go, Chinami!", "Not bad, Organizer!", "Super-chibi!", "I can't see you!", and so forth from here and there with supportive voices, people laughed and applauded. Mr. Two Dimensions and Mitsuo were also taking part, whistling heartily through their fingers, Banri raising his voice as

well, saying "Way to go, Oka-chaan!", slapping the table with the hand that didn't have a mug in it. Only Kouko, of course, looked uncomfortable, cradling her mug in both hands, though she looked over towards Chinami one time.

"I'm really glad to see all of you came here today, let's have a really good party! In firm solidarity with our fellow new students of the current year, we have an eye towards enriching our campus life! Needing to commemorate our association as classmates, let's celebrate our first meeting! Ah, one word of warning: no forcing anybody to drink! ...Good!? Isn't that right!? Well then, all together now!"

Everybody lifting their mugs together,

"Ch~~~~~~eer~~~~~~~~~~s!"

Going along with Chinami's voice, every seat in the house burst with energy. A terrific shout was raised.

"Noo! Cheers, cheers, Hey Yana-ssan! Mr. Two Dimensions too, Kaga-san too! Cheeerrss!"

Banri, reaching out without concern for spilling the contents, knocked his mug against those of his friend and gulped his beer down with gusto too. The beer, already warming a bit, gurgled in his throat as he drank it down. And then, halfway through wiping his mouth, visibly excited, he looked towards the organizer. Emptying what remained in her mug at once, she shouted "Whee!" with all the composure of a Texas Long Horn. Receiving such a loud ovation from everybody surprised Chinami. Even Mr. Two Dimensions shouted "Terrific!", his eyes going big and round.

If he looked towards Kouko, her handkerchief draped neatly over her lap, she was holding the mug in both hands, trying to taste it, but over by her Mitsuo was reaching out his arm with all his might. She tapped her mug to his, "klink". Banri was watching. Or rather, he saw because it was happening right in front of him.

"Just now, I believe we were the only ones who didn't tap our mugs together. Things like that bother me. Cheers."

"...Cheers."

Their eyes meeting for a moment, the two childhood friends spoke quietly together.

Since all you could drink didn't cost much, the orders were always by the pitcher-full, even the ice pails came heaping full, so everybody simply used the pour-it-yourself drinking method.

In the beginning, on each table there had been placed two pitchers of beer, all of them filled, nonetheless in a little while they started hearing things like, "Over there, since XX-kun is

requesting a currant soda, so the table in front of you.", "This, since XX-chan is asking for a green-apple sour, to this table.", "What shall we ask for next?" and so forth. But for the time being, the system was holding up.

But as time rolled on, the alcohol started affecting the young people's heads. Nobody quite knew what they were ordering, even the waiters, if they thought they hadn't brought anything would suddenly bring five or six full multicolored pitchers in replenishment, in turn some sort of sour, or some kind of highball. Even tasting the drinks, they didn't know very well what they were. Lined up sloppily on the tables it might have been only "alcohol-flavored" soda water.

Here and there drunken gibberish,

"Whaddya think dis is? Grapefruit sour? Moscow? Whaddisit?"

"Somethin's makin' it cloudy... Calpis, mebbe~...?"

"Whaddever 'twas, I drunk it~!"

"Shudd've mixed it first~! Idjit~!"

"Myahahahahahaha~!"

Like that, they laughed. Clapping and leaning against each other, they roared with laughter.

There were guys drinking directly from the pitchers, guys trying the cocktails as they pleased, guys going around the tables greedily eating the food, guys continuing to be disliked for offering indecent proposals to the girls, guys with red faces lying down on the floor, guys with vegetables stuck on their eyebrows, and besides that, many other things happening, from the toast to about one o'clock, when the group's excitement reached it's climax.

And then at that time, speaking of Mr. Two Dimensions,

"Yech! How many times this... who put this stuff in here! Disgusting! It makes no sense!"

Picking parsley out of his beer mug, he grimaced as if it were first time.

Somebody, drunk, had tried to toss food into the pitcher that shouldn't have been. Banri, reflexively, peeked into his own mug too. For once, there was no evidence of foreign substances mixed in. But it bothered him to see an iridescently spreading oil film on the surface.

"Mine's fairly decent, drink from mine."

His elbows on the table, Banri was on his fourth uulong tea highball...? He'd downed something like that to the last drop. When the mug turned upside down, ice fell on his face. Pushing aside the pitcher the parsley had fallen into, Mr. Two Dimensions said "Don't wannit!", looking for the next mug of uulong tea highball...? He reached out for a similar pitcher.

The feeling that they had gotten off to a late start, which somehow lingered even after the party started, left Banri and Mr. Two Dimensions feeling a little bit out of it.

The other people in the room had already changed into a completely drunken mass; even the seats were wearily involved. There was a group making noise in hoarse voices, both guys and girls stretched out on the cushions. With the girls still seriously asking things like, "XX-chan, are you OK~?", the guys were left alone entirely, rolling around here and there in a sight too painful to watch.

The difference between "Light" and "Dark" was quite clear.

Those silent, muddled, foundering guys were "Dark". Sitting idly separate, they were in a "why'd I come" state, playing with their cell-phones and games. In the "Light", stupid noisemakers formed into mixed groups, one guy, one girl, in pairs closely cuddling, exchanging contact information. They too were "Light".

Of course, Banri and Mr. Two Dimensions in their little corner were, clearly, dark. In their quiet area, like a lonely island left behind by the commotion,

"...Somehow all the three-dimensioners are really excited... looks fun..."

While holding the uulong tea highball (?) in his mouth, Mr. Two Dimensions murmured with a voice unable to cut through the tumult.

Banri looked around the area a bit with slightly blurry eyes too,

"Though I was once a three-dimensional person... hey... did you try and talk to somebody? To get casually closer to that fun looking group over there and try to mix in? At the least, there was somebody over there chatting a bit about Chinese."

He tried to point at the guys and girls mixing and chatting, looking like they were having fun, but,

"...Noo... nothing like that. Nothing else either. Rather, this way, those kinds of people have seemed like a wall for me... whatever, enough of that. Today has tired me out. No no, you and I are in a deliberate drinking mode."

In the end, Mr. Two Dimensions gave up the battle.

Stretching out their bodies lazily, piling up two half-broken cushions to support their backs, they laughed like crazy about how they looked like old men moving carefully. Enough of that for me too, said Banri, turning defiant also. Throwing himself down on the floor-mats, his elbow on the cushions,

"Anyway, aren't we a pair of guys talking carefully over our drinks? For the moment, I've never heard about this ‘Blood and Iron Girls!'...?"

The mug he'd been about to grab suddenly wasn't there, and he missed. Pulling Banri's mug out from under his arm and gulping it down all at once,

"...Hmph! Come on now, look around you! I'm the pitiful one here, without a single friend!"

Bam! The one who struck the table with such force was Kouko. Without anything to drink, Banri looked over at Mr. Two Dimensions, looking sad. "What the?" said Mr. Two Dimensions.

Facing Kouko was Mitsuo, seated Indian style,

"This ain't fun! Why, if I cannot look around, then I can't do anything!"

He was like a large dog, barking like crazy from the excitement. Gulping down his mysterious, ashen cocktail of too many things mixed together, he said "...You first!", and once more glared at Kouko.

---You guys too are "Light", aren't you? This didn't make sense. To Banri's eye, this appeared to be so. They lived in the delight-looking world of the two of them, man and woman.

Those guys, doing like this, will continue forever with their useless yapping and fighting. Mr. Two Dimensions, long ago already tired of intervening, was amazed.

It had to do with their earlier "agreement" that Banri had told Mitsuo about. That is, that Kouko from the very start wasn't the one who organized the party, nor, it seemed, did she even ask to come. It appeared that Mitsuo started spouting foolishness, which would have been OK if he could have passed it off as a joke, but he simply couldn't do anything so clever for Kouko, and with a "What the!?", she struck back at him, and it turned into a fight. "If Mitsuo in particular has never had the chance to party in all his life, then this agreement has no meaning, does it? As for me, because we do have a pact, then three people can always get together, though for Mitsuo even that is nothing, isn't it? Even being able to do so, it's a matter of 'I have no friends.', right? Such a pitiful looking thing, left entirely alone, I might have pitied him, but by our agreement, because we cannot take you in even if you are at death's door, don't go waiting miserably in line! If that be the case---", and from there one and one, for at least an hour. As for Banri and Mr. Two Dimensions, they disagreed constantly as to which of them they were on better terms with, and as to which was really their friend.

Can we even be friends, with things like this?

Banri and Mr. Two Dimensions, agreeing with only a glance, turned their backs and separated a little, but still their voices came to their ears.

"The main point, though, is that if Banri and Mr. Two Dimensions weren't my friends, then you would not have spoken of them as your friends!"

"Huh!? Might the Great Lord of Misfortune, 'Have-Nothing-Mitsuo', be coming to the conclusion that I am fated to have some friends!? By that in particular, and since you've been

removed from the agreement now, why don't you realize that little by little you're becoming one lonely cur!?"

"I-diot i-diot! Banri and Two-Dimensions are friends without there being any agreement! Besides, I've got friends in the film-studies club! Aren't there any other first-years in the Omaken!?"

"Hah! Fi-lm Stu-dies! Don't make me laugh even more! Since when have you ever had any interest in film-making? Are you switching to studying such characters? If you would, please explain to me this sudden mania, as a new student, for movie characters, those flimsy things, exposing their winding tails shamelessly in front of you while getting ready to run away from you!?"

"Wh, why does this suddenly have anything to do with you!?"

"Oh my, it looks like I've just hurt you! Have I hurt you!? But you haven't seen anything yet, you're really going to hurt!"

"Blast you! I have to deal with my future! In that respect, you being something entirely unrelated to me, I hope we never cross paths in my bright future! As for me, I will try hard in the Film Studies Club at making movies, studying a ton of movies with Chinami,"

"Oka Chinami!? That Ultrasonic!? Are you going to make me laugh again!? Look at reality! You've never been without friends! Just what are you dreaming!?"

"I have not!"

"You don't have!"

"I do have! And it's a good relationship, you just haven't seen it with your own eyes!"

"Well then, try and show me, that, the rumored 'about to be made friends of'! Where has Ultrasonic been from the start? She hasn't been here! She hasn't come near you at all! In short, it's a matter of 'not saying anything to Mitsuo'! Wouldn't it be better if you understood that!? Or are you planning on being the Ultrasonic's stalker!?"

"Huuhh!? What are you saying!? Talking like that!?"

ゴールデンタイム2
FRESHMAN'S COMPA

...Looking at the frowning Banri, fed up with their voices, Mr. Two Dimensions had an "ignore them" coolness to him as well.

And then pouring Banri sake from the pitcher again, giving a toast once more, just the two guys. Mr. Two Dimensions was trying to lean his back against the cushion, stuck against the sliding door,

"Uwa!?"

He jumped up suddenly, as if surprised.

"What, something happen?"

"So, something hit me pretty hard from the other side of the door..."

Automatically, Banri listened attentively, and there it was: a definite banging sound, continuing strangely. The wall separating the rooms would certainly fall down soon.

"It's true... is there a party next door? What might they be having, a party for sumo wrestlers? And then drinking practice? Something like that?"

At any rate, they probably didn't have chanko on the menu... Banri tried to open the partition carefully, Mr. Two Dimensions sticking with him too, the two of them peeking. And then, from an opening a few centimeters wide,

"Eh!? Aren't you Tada Banri and Two Dimensions!?"

"No way~ how unexpected~, good evening~"

---They had a glimpse of Hell.

Yikes! Banri was taken aback, Mr. Two Dimensions shuddered.

"It's the Tea Ceremony Club...!"

Crying 'It's a dragon's nest...!' with the same intonation, he closed the partition at once. 'Hey~that hu-rt~' and the sign of something caught, the tip of a tentacle probably. Not looking out of fear, for the moment Banri was pushing something away with the palms of his hands,

"...Aren't they Sao-chan and Shii-chan!?"

"Wasn't their territory just Amataro...!?"

This time, by main force, they closed the partition tightly. Wasn't there an amulet? Wasn't there any holy water? If they only had packing tape, or nails, though dynamite would be better.

When they'd turned and looked through the crevice, they'd seen two all too well remembered faces. They only saw a bit, but what they saw was enough. Over there, for sure, it was Sao-chan and Shii-chan. ...If we assume from that last shock, with "Nee-saan! You smell nice!", that it was the regular Tea Ceremony Club Bowling, with the Tea Club girls as sumo wrestlers or something...

"...Banri. We, didn't see anything at all."

"Ah. We didn't see anything. ...Ch, cheers!"

With Mr. Two Dimensions, even stronger than before, in complete desperation, they chugged down the contents of their beer mugs. They borrowed strength from the sake, but what they wanted was to completely forget the spectacle they had witnessed.

As you might expect, their heads were spinning by the time they lowered their mugs, Banri propping up his exhausted face with his elbow on the table.

"Ah... it's already, it doesn't make sense..."

Two Dimensions looked he felt the same, in the same pose, eyes half shut. In Banri's ears, he could still hear the voices of Mitsuo and Kouko arguing.

"Have you, perhaps, been only pretending from the start, trying to make me believe that Ultrasonic liked you?"

"Don't even think that!"

"It is absolutely the case! When you did so, you were only thinking about how much I'd be hurt. Those are not realistic thoughts! It's just not getting through to you!"

"You have nothing to do with me! Or rather, just how presumptuous can you be!?"

"Well then, I will make a prediction: Mitsuo will absolutely not be able to confess his feelings (or anything like it) to Supersonic! Because he's not prepared to do such things! If I were to fall to pieces, Mitsuo would be as pleased as can be, it would be the one thing of most delight in his life, he's such a little man! So, he will absolutely not confess to her! He doesn't have the wherewithal for reality!"

"Huh!? Aren't you being one-sided!? In general, in general you, ...aah! Enough! Just you wait and see...!"

Gulping down sake from a handy mug close by, Mitsuo's eyes held completely steady. Drinking roughly the same way, Kouko though seated still, was swaying as if in circles.

Thinking, "Are these two all right!?", but not feeling like butting in, Banri was simply watching how things unfolded. Mitsuo, lifting from his seat a little, called Chinami.

"Hey Yanaa, Kaga-saan, how's it going! You drinking!?"

Chinami, her face a little reddened, a mug in one hand, half full of something transparent, came over obediently. Plopping down on the cushion next to Mitsuo, perhaps due to being drunk having it more than ever, her prettily blurred eyes shone.

Sidling up to Chinami, Mitsuo crawled over on his elbows, and suddenly,

"Thanks for the gum the other day! Your feelings and mine will become the same, I'm pretty sure!"

Kouko looked back, said twice, "Got some gum, I got some gum the other day", and once more turning to face Chinami,

"Chinami! I love you! I want to go out with you!"

Kouko spit out the sake that was in her mouth. Banri sprang up. So did Mr. Two Dimensions. Staring in amazement, they looked at Mitsuo. Banri and Mr. Two Dimensions exchanged glances, having a conversation with only their eyes.

...This guy... He... he's gone and done it...

But Chinami's answer,

"Eh? Are you an idiot?"

Smiling, she was.

She continued, "Just how drunk are you?", the smile in her eyes cool.

Focusing directly on Mitsuo's eyes, Chinami's cute-looking face didn't waver at all.

"...O, o, o...!"

Covering his face, Mitsuo fell backwards then and there. Rolling, he ran into the pillar in the corner of the room. "Ooh...!", he groaned, voice low like a departed soul, his body twisting, one of his socks coming off, his draped-on sweater half off, somehow the zipper of his jeans coming half down too, his honor as a cool guy no longer preserved. "Good Heavens...!", playing dead, praying one-handedly, Mr. Two Dimensions watched the situation.

On the one hand, Kouko,

"Uwa... awawa... hawawawawawa..."

She'd become like a villager who'd seen a monster.

With her back bent, she trembled while looking over her shoulder and grabbing Banri's arm, "Auwawawa, hawawawa", pointing alternately at Chinami and Mitsuo, as yet still a chaotic scene. What's more, she was suddenly crying. Her eyes full, she was shedding tears.

"Hold on... th, there there... Kaga-san, calm down..."

"Pyaaaaa... haauwawawawawa... awawawawa..."

Wanting to say things like "who are you...", her personality indeed falling apart, Kouko, still grabbing Banri's arm, remaining still firmly seated, she crumbled over the table, laying her face down. Kouko died.

"...Hey Kaga-san..."

Kouko's nails were biting into Banri.

---In some calm place, Banri thought that already things didn't seem right.

Owing to the sake, his vision was spinning. He couldn't stop thinking. His chilled brain rested in just one place: it was already impossible. It returned to only that. It's already impossible. Seriously. Hey stop. Impossible.

But you, are you still at the same place? It looks like it.

It asked, "In the end, isn't it like that?"

It asked, "How many hours has it been til now?"

What am "I"? He was even getting to where he wanted to ask such. As far as you're concerned, what is "Tada Banri"? Is this being friends?

What are ‘friends', in Kaga Kouko's world, but a convenient dumping ground for feelings when the destination has been lost?

Is she treating me that way?

...He was already dumbfounded. He'd even run out of rationalizations. I am already impossible. This is far enough. So Banri thought.

With the Kouko who was still watching the Mitsuo who had gotten to this point, had gotten to such a place as this, who had confessed to Chinami, dating was no longer possible.

Going out with her was truly no longer possible.

Banri's clothing was being bitten into by her slender fingers, one finger at a time, one pinch after another. A little apart from them, Two Dimensions was struggling to tackle Mitsuo by the hips.

Out of my sight, you two. Banri made eye-contact with Two Dimensions.

"Mr. Two Dimensions... ready?"

"Ho hoo... you're a demon, Banri."

Even Two Dimensions caught the meaning, dragging Mitsuo along by his hips. With grim determination, he opened the partition a few tens of centimeters. And then,

"Oh Great Sisters~! We wish to offer up these two in tribute to you~!"

No sooner did he cry that, then Mitsuo was thrown out, over the partition line.

"Whee~! It's a handsome one~!"

"Or rather, this girl has come as a new member~!"

"Thanks for the meal!" He was suddenly drawn inside and his shape vanished. The highlight, Kouko was next. "Here's another~", trying to push her through, "Mmm~, a girl!", "Doesn't she have such smooth, pretty skin~!", "She's going to get teased, poor thing~", "De, li, ci, ous~" ...dragged by her feet, formerly the figure of Banri's dreams, as it was, she was slowly swallowed up by the Tea Ceremony Club. Her tear-stained face looking back up at Banri, she cried "Why~, How~", but,

"..."

To the very end, scratching the mats with her hands, they pushed her away, resolutely, and closed the partition.

They heaved a sigh.

"That was exhausting. Really and truly."

They turned towards Chinami and tried to smile. Chinami kept herself apart from them for just a moment, and returned their smiles. Her flushed cheeks shone roundly. And then, pointing to herself,

"Demon?"

Was all she said. Banri slowly shook his head back and forth. Two Dimensions did likewise. Or rather, even as a demon she was OK. He thought that was just fine. It wasn't any mistake of hers. Even though they were drunk, it was nothing. Even Mitsuo couldn't lawyer his way out of it. ...It wasn't a lie! At most, he could talk about it, that's all.

Chinami suddenly lowered her little face, and seemed strangely lonely. Banri was caught by surprise, but,

"...Nooo. Oka Chinami is a camera. The left-out outsider."

Chinami shortly raised her head. From the little bag that was so important to her earlier, she pulled out the very latest Handycam and showed it to them.

"I wanted to show you this! Earlier, I took shots of everybody's faces with this."

"Whaa! That was your super precious treasure?"

"Yep. I've always wanted this camera, now that I've finally bought it, I'm happy! This way, various people's faces--- this time, the faces of kids I've met in college, I was receiving them in commemoration. Would you mind?"

Banri and Two Dimensions nodded, and seeming truly delighted, Chinami turned the lens towards them.

"Though it's rather like a practice run still, anyway I'm making a sort of collage this way, trying to constrain it to a single theme, you see. As if it were a single movie. Though such things are rather common, perhaps, but in our lives, we'll only be freshman college students now, right? I think it's precious, I do. A private thing; as far as I'm concerned a precious work it will become, won't it~ So, um, let's get on with it. Today Mr. Two Dimensions has become a friend, ah, let's hear a word or two from him!"

"U, um, err!? Um, no! I'm drinking! I'm near-sighted!"

Two Dimensions suddenly pulled off his glasses. Surprisingly, his face didn't look different without them. Continuing, the lens turned towards Banri.

"Over here is Tada Banri. Say something too, Banri, give us something really funny!"

"Hmm!? Ah, ...I, I'm Tada Banri! I, err... well,"

His mind went entirely blank. Nothing super interesting coming suddenly to mind, he muttered "Why such a high hurdle for me?" while shuddering,

"...Ah, no way! Nothing's coming to me at all! For now... I exist! Somehow I manage to keep my spirits up! ...And more! Forgive me, but nothing more! Excuse me already, Oka-chan, but I'm not all that interesting!"

He waved his hand towards the camera to hide from it. Chinami laughed and turned off the camera.

* * *

"Kaga-san! Wait, wait, wait, be careful!"

"Kyaaa~ hahahahahaaaaaaa~~~~!"

"Where are you going!? Hold on!"

In the end, it was like this.

Kouko's bag hanging from his shoulder, Banri chased frantically after Kouko. Kouko, laughing loudly, somewhat funnily, or perhaps crazily, was running down the street at night, her skirt flying.

She was very drunk, of course, running swiftly while staggering here, staggering there, recklessly causing trouble for a while now for all the somber-faced office workers, their suited forms heading for the train stations.

"Ahaha, ahaha, kya~ ahahahahaha! Chase me, plea~~~se!"

She cut straight through a crowd of people behaving like office ladies, "Hey!" "What's this!?", running into them recklessly and breaking them up. Banri, saying "Excuse us! Sorry about that! Please forgive us!", apologizing like crazy, on the verge of tears, chased after Kouko.

It was horrible. Truly.

"You're really being irresponsible!"

"I don't care~~! It has nothing to do with mee~~~! This is fun~~~! ...Urp"

While spinning on tiptoes like a ballerina, Kouko was rushing towards some bushes. And just like that, she plunged clumsily, bottom-first into a thicket of azaleas. No sooner was she planted in the shrubbery, a car went past on the road. Banri, in a panic, about to lift her up,

"...Whoa...!"

Truly, it was the worst. Being forced to sprint as hard as he could right after drinking an uulong highball, there was no way he wasn't going to get dizzy, was there? Feeling faint, he'd given into Kouko's weight and had fallen entirely into the azalea bushes.

As he frantically tried to support the weight of the two of them and stay balanced too, Kouko's breath, smelling of sake, came quietly and warmly to his ears. And then she murmured something.

"...Tha, thad feld bad... again, someding, I feld... urp..."

"Please stop..."

Still stuck deep in the shrubbery, moving his back up and down with Kouko, as yet unable to get themselves up, Banri was pierced by the chilly gazes of the people passing by. "Are they students?" "I think they're a menace to society." ...Being clucked at, having scorn blatantly heaped upon him, Banri, tired of apologizing, snapped.

"Enough already! If you've got to throw up, do you have to do it here!?"

Opening fully her indeed expensive looking brand-name purse, Kouko held it reverently beneath her face. Swinging her mussed-up hair frantically from side to side, Kouko hid her mouth with her hand and with a suspicious-looking movement gulped something down, and then from inside the bag she quickly pulled something out. She thrust it in front of Banri's face.

NO!

---Using the yes/no fan from Omaken.

"Why do you have such a thing right now... hey, wait!"

Kouko, kicking her feet like she was impatient, escaped from the hedge before Banri, and holding only the fan in one hand took off once more with incredible energy. "Tha tha that... golden piece of junk!" He pulled at his hair in frustration, but still, Banri had no choice but to chase her. You know already? He was to where he wanted to drop her bag and her too, and be

left behind himself. But he knew that if he abandoned her, rushing down the road the way she was, she was quite capable of being turned into a miserable heap of scrap.

For now, he felt responsible for her.

He (and 2-D) had thrown Kouko (and Mitsuo) into a hell on earth.

And it really was hell... it had to be.

At first they stayed strictly in the first party, while practically everybody, including Chinami, was flowing out to the afterparty, Banri and Two Dimensions remained together in the tavern. Then, in order to collect the bones of the two made into sacrifices, they peeked fearfully into the next room.

When Banri said, "All of you monster girls", Two Dimensions said, 'Eh? Those guys are *seafood*!?' ...it seems he heard it as 'fish and shellfish'--- but they'd already struck camp; Sao-chan & Shii-chan were no longer there, and the room where the Tea Ceremony Club had been was as still as death.

For some reason, the tables were all moved a little bit closer together. Left behind were as many as three times the empty pitchers as the freshman students had drunk, and the cushions had been strewn all over the tatami mats. And then, in the middle of that empty space. Mitsuo and Kouko had been left behind there, in an exceedingly cruel way. It was too much. Two Dimensions screamed, covering his eyes with his hands. Banri recoiled. Straight before them were the forms of a handsome man and a beautiful girl who could not endure.

Cripes, that such a horrible thing could happen in this world...

Though it was on top of their clothing, they had towels tied about them as mawashi. They, mostly probably, had been forced. ...To a bout!

They helped the two of them up, made to drink, they were so drunken they couldn't untie their mawashis by themselves. Two Dimensions took charge of Mitsuo, and then Banri of Kouko. Kouko drank some water, and for quite a while secluded herself in the bathroom, throwing up over and over. Her spirits restored a bit, she stood up, wobbly. Eventually they walked outside, and then her mind suddenly went wild,

"Kya~~~~! Ahahahahaha! Ahaha, ahaha, a~hahahahahaha!"

It had come to this.

Running around in the night streets, flying along with the fan fluttering.

Kouko kept running stubbornly away, her high-heels ringing.

For his part, already running after her, Banri was quite groggy. Feeling lousy, his eyes spinning,

if he were to throw up now, he was pretty sure he'd've throw up many times more.

Nowadays in the heart of metropolitan Tokyo, everywhere you go there are nothing but no-smoking areas, and this area wasn't an exception. Sometimes in the alleys between the office buildings, in lonely parks too (I cannot say), nearly every space hidden from sight by gloomy, shabby bushes, has, in general, become a place to hide and smoke. He didn't know who managed to do it, but a pile of big, fat cigarette butts had been stuffed into the bushes, and from where Kouko had gone flying out just now, they'd built up even into a bench.

He sighed. "...Al, already I've... had enough!"

Kouko was standing on a bench she'd jumped onto, like a leading lady upon a stage. Banri was finally exhausted. He fell to the ground as if he were kneeling, not even his pride there anymore. Like the islanders who worshipped Mothra, both his hands were raised in simple supplication.

"Shall we go home already!? Hmm!? Please, Kaga-san! I ask of you! Ride with me! In a taxi!"

But Kouko's answer,

"No!"

Snap! Putting forward the NO side of the fan, she basked in the light and struck a pose. She barely stood on her unsteady feet, but she was imposing, planted on top of the bench.

"How can that be!? What do you mean by doing such things!? Am I that awful!? If Yana-ssan were to say 'come back', would you prefer that!?"

"No!"

Drunken eyes, smiling mouth.

This was no laughing matter. If Kouko didn't return home, he wouldn't either, it would be dangerous if he lost sight of her, and he wouldn't be able to call for help in his cell-phone. If they got into trouble like this, they wouldn't be able to get out of it. They'd be a problem for all the other freshmen they'd gone drinking with, and even for the persistent Chinami.

"Well then... enough! Just what am I to do!? What should I do!? Can this be something more for me? What about me!? Me, this... this, doing like this, being embarassed, is it 'being friends'!? Did you want this!?"

Wobbling, Kouko suddenly flipped her fan around. The answer: Yes.

---Why, he wondered if it was now.

It was entirely as if he'd been pierced by an arrow. The arrow fired by Kouko that Saturday drew a wide arc in the sky and was slowly turning towards the fan. And now, it descended on

Banri. Now it came to stab his body, over and over again. I do not love you. Banri was assailed by such a arrowhead. Blood spurting out, Banri was wounded.

To the degree his pain wasn't given substance, he wondered how, at such a time, his body could be tormented. Not wanting to cry, Banri was at a loss. Unable to stop himself, he sank down to the ground, his hands shaking clumsily.

What are such women!?

To myself, to Tada Banri, you are doing such a horrible thing, Kaga Kouko.

Even though I love you, you don't love me. Though it was not love, the relationship felt good, you said. So I want to be friends, you said. I've been chasing after the you that's been crying over the other guy. You've been running away from me. And yet, I've been unable to not want to chase you. Even understanding that I could never catch you, I still could not stop chasing you. And because of that, even if I could save you, it would not be enough for me.

Because she's my friend.

And that was fine, he'd once thought. For her sake, he had wished from the bottom of his heart to support her. Those feelings were the real thing.

But,

"...Would it be all right if we stopped already?"

There are limits.

The kind, true feelings, the ulterior motives he had wanted to hide, the regrets, whatever other thoughts as well, these had already come to an end. Exhausted, there was already nothing more to come out of Banri.

If there's no love, then so be it. There was no use complaining about it. He had just enough wisdom to think so. But, still, still and yet, and yet--- he didn't want to make use of it.

He could not stand being treated this way, being tossed into a convenient garbage can labeled 'friends'. He would not allow himself the fate of being treated all the time like that.

"I want to stop. Being friends. OK?"

Still sitting on the ground, Banri looked up at Kouko's face. Kouko, her eyes looking off somewhere vacantly, was standing on top of the bench, doing nothing. While her body swung from side to side, she looked down upon Banri.

Banri pulled the hand-mirror out of his back pocket. It sparkled dazzlingly under the light, a flare of light in his vision as he extended it out to her.

Examining the pretty thing a little bit,

"Answer 'yes'! I don't want to be friends with Kaga-san anymore. After all, you said this and that, but always about Yana-ssan. Only about Yana-ssan. Yana-ssan said he loved Oka-chan, and you cried and made a fuss about it... Did you happen to consider my feelings, as I was made to watch that happen next to me? You didn't, right? If we were friends, just what did you think I was supposed to do? Those who don't care for me, I cannot care for either. It's about time we split, seriously. Like that. Now, shouldn't we?"

Extending his arm, he presented it to Kouko.

Kouko, a strange expression still on her face, looked at the friendship mirror Banri extended to her.

The fan didn't move. Neither did Kouko. Banri, impatient, "Enough already", dropped the hand-mirror into Kouko's bag.

"So, 'yes' was your answer. With that, from this moment, I am no longer Kaga-san's friend. OK?"

Finally, as if taking a breath Kouko's mouth opened a little. Her soft lips, the long eyelashes that even from here could be seen to be trembling slightly, as if scared. Awkwardly, the fan was turned towards Banri.

No.

She doesn't understand. She's like that.

"...You don't want to stop being my friend?"

No.

"Because being with me feels good? Because I seem to understand the clumsy Kaga-san well? Loving you even when you're useless? And therefore you're able to be your true, honest self? Breaking down my stubbornness, being able to spoil me?"

Yes.

Moving the fan many more times, Kouko insisted over and over again: Yes, Tada-kun!

"Give up. I won't be spoiled! When you dumped me, you lost even the right to wish for what you had been saying from the start. I saw the extension as convenient for me. I've now realized that I was making a mistake. I thought that I wanted to understand you, because I loved you. I tried to be boyfriend and girlfriend, because I wanted to go out with you. That feeling was by no means, 'After being dumped, this time I will try to support Kaga-san, helping her with her love'. That wasn't happening. It absolutely will not happen. Eternally never. I can't do that kind of

thing. ...But for me, at last I understood. If you were to become close with any other guy, I would get uncomfortable. Therefore, from now on I cannot be concerned with you. Though I'm saying it rather bluntly, I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore."

No! No! No! As if slapping something, Kouko was waving her fan. Her voice wasn't coming out. Simply opening her eyes wide, staring directly at Banri's face, she was bracing her legs so as to not fall down. Her white chin was quaking, as if she were struggling to breathe.

"...If you hate me like that, well, well then,"

She seemed to be entirely done with laughing.

She almost made him laugh. He was about ready to burst. His own foolishness, playing the clown after a long time. Oka-chan, you can take a shot of me! Because my present self, perhaps, has reached an all-time record for funny. Because you should have quite a laugh.

"Of course, you want to go out with me!? It's OK! Now, if possible! Now is not too late! ...How's about it!? If now, then because Yana-ssan was no good, then let's campaign for Tada Banri! If now, then I'm allowed! How about it!? Be courageous, for now it looks like we're doing that!?"

---Kouko, she didn't laugh at me.

"Wa,"

Her high-heeled feet making her wobbly,

"...Wait...!"

She spoke as if out of breath.

"No way. I'm not waiting. As for me, I don't wait for anybody anymore."

The fan wasn't moving. If the answer is not 'yes', then the campaign is over.

Banri stood up despite how light-headed he had gotten and extended her bag to Kouko. With an uncertain gait, she finally descended from the bench for him. As if clinging to the hand which held the bag, Banri jerked his chin 'Let's go'.

"Even if you don't come, I'm not waiting. Wherever you escape to, I won't be chasing after you anymore."

"...Tada-kun...! I, I..."

Turning down the street, he walked off. The sound of her footsteps was slow, but she followed just behind him.

"Hey, please... hey... listen to me... please... you're wrong, it's wrong, I, I..."

"No!"

Stopping alongside a taxi with it's 'available' sign lit up, Banri turned around. To the taxi-driver by the open door, he pointed at the petrified Kouko, saying "This person needs a ride." After that, only two words.

As cleanly as possible, with no loose ends left behind. He wished for her to forget everything. You don't love me.

If this is good-bye--- then farewell it is.

"Good bye."

Chapter 4

Tada Banri looked out the window.

It was eight in the morning.

Stopping his cell-phone alarm, which had just started sounding, he slowly raised his body from bed.

One futon was laid out on the floor, with Mitsuo and Two Dimensions peacefully situated there, their heads in opposite directions. Despite their smelling each other's feet and occasionally moaning as if suffocating in a nightmare, the two of them were still sleeping.

Banri stretched out his hand from his bed and poked Mitsuo on the shoulder. "Yana-ssan, shouldn't you be heading home before long?", he said, his voice extremely hoarse, sounding bone dry.

Mitsuo blinked, opened his watery eyes, and confirmed the time against his own cell-phone. And then he flipped it shut. He turned his face away from Two Dimension's feet, and as if he'd managed to escape once more, he buried himself deeply in his towel-blanket. Was it worth it? Probably not. It doesn't matter. Take your time.

To the north side of the room there was a veranda, to the west side a waist-high window had been set. The sunlight shining from the other side of the curtains is weak even when the weather was good, and doesn't reach to my feet as I am seated on the stool, no matter what.

From within the cool dark shadows again this morning, I watched the only person with his eyes

open, Banri, giving up on waking Mitsuo.

Banri hadn't slept at all, just about. Even after his exhausted friends stayed over and fell asleep, he'd stayed awake, alone, thinking over the matter of Kaga Kouko, his eyes open.

I am not waiting for anyone, anymore. Facing her, Banri had said so.

This, to me, is somewhat of a marvel. Might some of the remnants of my memories be clinging inside of this Banri's body? Once upon a time, I had decided to not wait for anyone, anymore, I had. At the time I made that decision, it was something characteristic of me.

So it was. I--- Tada Banri, for a second time had decided to not wait for anybody.

That was decided, that day. I existed then, that other day. The Banri existing now shouldn't know about that morning.

Alighting from the stool, I stepped softly over Mitsuo and Two Dimension's bodies and sat down on the corner of the risen Banri's bed. What was originally me leaned in close to Banri's body, and in the warmth the dead me started helplessly reviewing the memories.

He was waiting, but because he felt like running away, he had the volume raised. Any song, any singer would do.

From that bridge he was looking down, vaguely, upon the vast riverbank scenery he was familiar with since childhood.

Looking towards the opposite shore reached by the bridge, he was frightened. He was scared.

He waited and waited, but nobody came. Not coming, and so he decided to not wait any longer.

And then, turning my back on the riverbank, I set out walking over the long bridge and towards the mountains where my own house was... set out walking, and it all ended, going out to meet an instant of whiteness.

---Not having slept, Banri's eyes were red and dry.

Slowly, he laid his body down on the sheets again. So doing, the pale morning sun tinting everything yellow, he quietly looked up at the ceiling.

The room smelled of sake.

On the table, there were plastic drink bottles on top of plastic drink bottles. A tower of Chuuhai cans, piled up for fun. A plastic bag from the convenience store, stuffed full of garbage. Balled-up tissues. A cell-phone charger. Fallen to the floor, the television remote. The remnants of a bag full of candy. PET-bottle caps. An extra strap. Mitsuo's socks. Torn double-leafed pages. Two Dimensions' glasses. A cloth for cleaning glasses. A glasses case.

Nobody spoke.

On such a morning, Banri merely existed.

* * *

After fourth period, Banri was a complete zombie.

He was in an awful, intolerable mood.

With the least movement his head rang like a bell, his head, stomach, throat, back and hips hurt. Everything was sluggish, his feet were heavy. Far from concentrating on the lectures, he couldn't keep from dozing off.

The lecture over, delayed quite a bit by the other students streaming out into the noisy hallway, he finally stood up, dragging his bag along with him. Feeling terribly heavy, pushing open the door with both hands, he dragged himself out into the dark corridor, with its students coming and going. A unpleasant burp escaped him, and he held back a hot sensation from the area of his stomach.

By any chance, was this the state the world called 'being hung over'?

In this condition since the morning, for now he wondered if it would help if he ate something, though he suspected that wolfing down lunch wouldn't be a good idea. But even more than usual, the school cafeteria daily special was a mixture of fried stuff, and eating lunch without anybody to talk to, he cleaned his plate entirely, as fast as he could.

Yesterday, he'd noticed some friends heading towards an afterparty. From what he saw and heard, they seemed to be excited about a dirt-cheap karaoke place. In the end, five places... until seven in the morning, they said they drank. "What do you expect, though we left the fifth party", they'd laughed, their faces ghastly pale.

In second period, he found an unexpectedly energetic-looking Chinami, but then she said, with her cute anime voice, but dry and hoarse, "Talked too much, sang too much." Mitsuo said, "See me in the afternoon after I've gone home and got a shower", cutting him off and getting on a train going in the opposite direction, and Two Dimensions had declared, "I'm skipping today", and making good on his word, didn't show up.

Banri, rubbing around his chin, which was tingling strangely, yawned a bit, went out into the hall and headed for the stairs. Today, as things were, even if he had shopping to do or anywhere else to go, he was heading straight back. Once home he was going to cook himself okayu or something. He was lost in thought, when from behind him,

"Ta-da, Ba-n-ri"

She was calling his name in musical notes, as if singing, though for a woman her voice was a bit low and cool.

He knew at once who's voice it was, without even turning his head.

"What's with the face?"

"Morning... well... it's a hangover."

Hands still deep in the pockets of her hoodie, she walked around to the front of him. Peeking at Banri's face, it was as he thought: Linda. Her shiny, black, evenly cut hair swaying about her chin, she frowned as if she were concerned. Khaki cargo pants, with flourescent yellow Nikes. White, slender ankles. A friendly look on her face. Apparently worried, her pale lips were pursed.

For some reason, Banri was slowly pulling back.

"What, are you feeling bad? Shall I go to the infirmary? I could bring you something for your stomach."

Shaking his head from side to side, he tried to avoid Linda.

"...No, that's fine. I'm OK, it's no big deal. I was already thinking of going home."

In other words, he was trying to avoid looking at Linda. He was tired. Even talking was painful.

"I see. If so, then since you're leaving would you mind coming with me for a bit? There's something I need to post in the lobby. Since it looks like we've set next month's practice schedule, I wanted to post it."

"Ah... err..."

The energy required to turn her down having deserted him already, Banri looked downward ambiguously, not knowing what else to do. Linda acted as if he'd decided "yes".

"Then let's go. Come on."

As if to urge him along, she walked on ahead of him. There being no alternative, Banri followed at once, dragging his heavy feet.

Lightly turning about, Linda pointed a slender finger at Banri's feet.

"That reminds me: you're wearing the shoes I gave you. How are they?"

Yesterday, he had washed his customary Jack Purcells (well seasoned by his own vomit) in the bathroom and set them to dry in the middle of the veranda. Today was the first day he had worn the New Balance shoes that Linda had given him.

"They're great!", Banri replied, somehow smiling like an underclassman.

Their small college department, located right in the middle of a city center office block, had guaranteed ease of access from entry to graduation, but in exchange for this, they didn't build things like cool club buildings. They didn't waste money on club rooms.

Because of that, such people from campus as wanted to get together and chat, had no choice but to line up by the tables in the lobby, in the corners of the cafeteria, or to take up positions in the various gathering places or smoking sections.

In the Omaken's case, it was the edge of the lobby. With a bulletin board for posting news about lecture cancellations and for posting personal notes, and with constant foot traffic going by, you couldn't call it a bad spot. Not for a small, obscure club it wasn't.

As it happened, the most comfortable place was in the back of the cafeteria, hidden from sight by the largest pillar. The people who used that spot the most were from the Law School Tennis Club. Leaving huge bags there, opening meetings and doing whatever they felt like doing, they created an atmosphere such that Banri's group (or other students) couldn't even step foot there.

Banri followed behind Linda, until they got to the table in front of the bulletin board.

A bunch of upperclassmen, all sitting back relaxed on a bench, waved him over.

"Aren't you Tada Banri? You sit over there!"

"Morning, pardon me... I heard there was something on the schedule..."

On the closest bench, Kouko was sitting, shrunken.

She must've noticed Banri's voice, as her white face turned this way.

Their eyes met.

Wearing a chiffon top with little flowers on it, a black miniskirt over black tights. Some things he'd seen before, like the black booties. She wasn't wearing a hairband either, her long, uncurled hair spilling down her back for now. She seemed to hardly have any makeup on, and where normally she took great pains to put herself in order, she was now looking pretty awful. Her swollen eyes were more awful than a bear's. She had drank no less than Banri last night. It appeared she was suffering from a hangover worse than his own.

Not even knowing what kind of expression he showed, their eyes still in contact, Banri had stopped moving, like a broken robot.

Kouko, like that, gave Banri a small, weak smile with parched lips, and raised one hand only so high as her chest.

For now, he acknowledged that with an ambiguous nod, but, beyond that, of course, he couldn't do anything more.

Only able to quietly avert his gaze from Kouko, he sat down at the other end of the bench, with the table between them.

What he should do, he did not know. Banri hung his head and lowered his gaze.

With what kind of face was he to look at her, if there was no love, nor friendship, and he personally wanted the relationship to go away?

He wondered if he ought to behave as if he'd forgotten everything, and show a face of "I don't know you at all." It was as if everything up to now were made null, so, for example,

"Hey, hey, where'd they put the schedule? Somebody took it?"

---He wondered if Linda was manipulating him.

To be precise, as she might have done in the past. Always with 'nothing'. Hello, how are you? Who are you? Like that.

Linda: next to Banri, quietly looking sidelong at how he was doing. Kneeling crudely on top of the bench, tossing snack candies somebody had scattered on the table into her mouth with one hand.

Once again, he thought Linda assertive, ridiculously so. That wouldn't work on him, of course. For the same reason, it wouldn't work on her either. Such were his thoughts.

As for himself, he didn't understand at all how it would be good to continue seeing Kouko. Still confused, his body stiffened. No matter what, for the two of them to arrive at the same time couldn't be 'nothing'. Therefore, the two of them must've arranged a mess like this. And it was a bloody mess: their heads cast down, their eyes averted, seated awkwardly apart, and on top of that, with their unsightly, dreadful, fresh wounds showing. Banri could not be anything but that.

But Linda was wrong about Banri. Pretending not to know him, making it quite clear where she'd heard his name. Inviting him into a club. Treating him as a juniorclassman, not revealing your true colors. The Linda-senpai beside him, eating snacks, laughing lightly.

Fine. I can do such things.

A bit surprised, Banri looked at Linda once more.

Just because he had lost his memories, it doesn't mean he didn't know anything about anyone or from where they came. His identity was always established by his loss of memory, nothing more. If, for example, he found himself in a conversation like "Where was your high school?", it would come up as often as not. That they were classmates was obvious, but to stay like this forever, never revealing the full truth, would be impossible. So long as she didn't lie or misrepresent herself, Linda's act was doomed to fail before too long. In spite of that, she was doing it. Now, even. This instant, even. Calm and composed, she kept on doing it.

If he had done to Kouko the same thing Linda was doing to him--- "How do you do, who are you? What's your name?" if Kouko had heard him, if it would start a relationship from the first, brand new meeting. Would he be able to be clever, like Linda?

Trying to think, Banri thought at once: There was no way he could. The time, so short yet so strangely full, that he'd spent with Kouko, the past he'd had with her, all that they had built up, he could not deny quite so easily. He could not make it as if hadn't happened.

Or rather: he didn't want to.

Because he was that way, was he not too pitiful?

Kouko's past, his own past, was a fact. In which case, it was all the more a pity.

Though that time had certainly happened, though it had being, to erase it entirely for the convenience of the current Banri was something he absolutely did not want to do. The joy in the moment of understanding, the shock of recognizing love, the unforgiveable impatience, the ulterior motives, the misery, the grief, the smiles, the tears, the foolishness too, the hurt feelings as well--- all of those were, clearly, irreplaceable moments. Be they good or bad, as far as he was concerned, they were all important. They were worth caring for. Banri felt that he must not lose them. He could not part with such things.

And yet, how, this person...

"Want some?"

Suddenly grabbing a snack with her fingertips, Linda waved it in front of Banri's nose. Banri shook his head side to side. A throbbing pain shot through his head.

"...I'm not feeling well."

"Oh, forgot that."

Sorry sorry, tossing it into her own mouth, and wiping her finger with a tissue, Linda pulled out three schedule sheets from a clear vinyl folder. Keeping one page for herself, she passed one to Banri and another to Kouko.

"Kouko-chan, perhaps, has a hangover too? Though both of you smell a bit of sake."

"Eh, really? ...We shouldn't, not any longer."

Kouko, frowning slightly, covered her own mouth with a handkerchief. Like that, she mumbled in a weak voice. Perhaps the same as Banri, she must be getting a headache from just speaking.

"Yesterday was the freshmen drinking party. Together with Tada-kun, I drank a bit too much..."

"Eh what what!? What happened!? Now they tempted you into a drinking party!?

At the clear voice suddenly reverberating over her head, Kouko groaned, her face in a grimace. Banri put his hands to his temples too.

The former president who the other day had come in a suit, showed up today dressed in an normal polo-shirt and cotton pants style. With a friendly grin, in excessively good humor, with what everybody automatically thought of as a cheerful face,

"Did you, perhaps, get a job offer!?"

But,

"Eh, how? Nothing's come up yet, nothing at all, or rather, not one guy's shown up in my wanderings!"

Al---ways, such as want to be fools have bottomless cheer. Moreover,

"For today, I've only got English. Haha, my third time repeating it!"

...Though he'd now reached his fourth year, it appeared he hadn't gotten his language credit yet.

"Because the road ahead is dark still, I cheer myself up! Is that a problem!? Rather, did somebody say when the next drinking party is? What, what, I wanna go, I wanna drink, sake! Let's do a drinking party! Today, let's everybody go from here! Hey hey, sake sake sake! It'll be fun~!"

Linda, the palms of her hands lifted towards him, lept up to explain to the excited ex-president in simple terms.

"Hosshii-senpai. Calm down, it's not what you think."

Hosshii... that's it: somebody, Hoshino-senpai... was it something like that?

Banri tried to organize in his head the as yet incompletely memorized names and faces of the various upperclassmen. The ex-president Hoshino-senpai... Hosshii. Slightly monkey-like, sinewy body, the first guy to have a good chat with Banri, the nice guy Yoshino-senpai...

Yosshii. Other than that, the present president of the third years, who played music, Kago-senpai... another guy called Kosshii... It was making Banri's headache even worse. Memorizing was such a pain. How was he going to be an Omaken!?

"Tada Banri and Kouko-chan have hangovers. That okay with you? We were only talking about that kind of stuff. So, as for specially scheduling a party now,"

"A hangover!? If that's all, don't you just have to drink some more!? Freshmen, you know what? The cure for a hangover is a drink in the morning! That's all! To get to where you can forget how bad you're feeling, drink, drink until you've gotten drunk, then right away have another together! Right!? So let's go drinking, okay!? I want to, I, I want to go drinking, to have fun drinking with all the underclassmen, but I want to escape from reality for a bit, even talking with my fellow job hunters, the sake is awful. I'm still off on my own, but it looks like I'm going home and won't be able to come back, so, how about it!? So please let's go drinking!? Shall we!? That OK!? Is it no good!? Is it bad!? Can't an unqualified human like me go drinking without conditions? As president of the club I tried hard to manage the club, but since it was such a small sales point, wasn't it simply better to say nothing? Hey, wasn't it!? But then, what was I to do!? What will I do if I cannot find a job? If it's real estate agent, I'll take it. If it's notary public, I'll take that too. I'll take the English and Law tests, because I must! I mean, even my senpai's job hunt isn't concluded yet! What are you doing senpai!? What am I doing!? Even with that, before long they're coming, they've come, the third-years have come to the seminar! No way, don't come! I mean, from now on what must I do to exist, I want to live normally, that's all, but in luxury!? Is this living in luxury!? Ah~~~~ but I want to live~~~~~ sorr~~~~~y! Apart from that, I don't wish for anything more, gods help me, I'm scare~~~~~d! I'm afraid I'll be broken by this record-breaking ice age! Aahhh~~~~ let's go have a fes-ti-valllll~~~~!!"

Everybody in the place exchanged silent glances. Banri too. Kouko too.

...Unable to help him find employment, or even a festival, for the time being, taking that pitiful fourth-year to go drinking was all they could do.

The two freshmen offered up their livers as sacrifice.

* * *

As if they were fully rewinding time, Banri went to the same place as yesterday.

The same tavern, the same all-you-can-drink, even the same room as yesterday, sitting with his back to the partition, even the same spot. Kouko next to him--- it had turned out that way naturally--- all the same.

As he heard the talking of groups of other members and fourth-year students gathering together, he realized that the Omaken had become a rather large family. The drinking party started.

At the sound of "Cheers" from the president, beer mugs came near to mouths,

"...Ugh..."

Banri groaned.

It was only the smell, but from now on it will seem like vomit. But though he hesitated, and he felt awful, he muttered to himself "Whatever...", and tasted it. Feeling about ready to throw up, he thought he should gulp it down all at once.

Gulping it down, the feel of the cold beer passing down his throat was nevertheless pleasant for now, he drank it all down in one gulp, even the foam head. He peeked quietly, sidelong, at Kouko, who for a while had hardly touched her oolong tea, now, as if resolved to do it, seized her beer mug. She tasted it, tossed her head back, and emptied her mug with gusto no less than Banri's.

"Is she okay!? 'Cause I don't see any problems at all so far..", Banri muttered to himself, but,

"Oh! There's a freshman girl whose drinking style ain't bad! She looks more promising than we've seen in a long time~ Come on over here so we can talk a bit!"

A mixed group of upperclassmen was beckoning to Kouko. "Com-ing! ...urp...", she covered her mouth with a handkerchief even as she obediently got up and walked over to them.

And then onto the open cushion,

"Hold on. You don't need to overdo it with the sake, you know? That pitcher of oolong, it's for you two to keep. If the seniors say anything, you ought to say it's an oolong highball. Those guys are going to be drunk before you know it. Then you can leave quietly without being noticed."

Linda had come over, her expression a little concerned. Speaking with her voice lowered, she sat down on the cushion.

She peered at Banri's face, checking to see if his cheeks were flushed red. When Banri didn't say anything more,

"Oh well. That's how it is."

Her style a little strange, she continued talking. Moistening her lips from the mug of beer, she laughed in profile.

"Look, new member. You haven't done anything, right? What with one thing after another

having happened so quickly, for now, perhaps it was good you had an opportunity like this. Though for you guys it was inconvenient, I think that for the seniors, even getting together will become more difficult from now on."

"...Haa..."

"What do you mean by 'Haa'... what's wrong? Have you reached your limits? Do you need to lie down?"

Linda quietly gave him space, giving Banri room so he might be able to sleep, but Banri, still seated, didn't move at all.

Even with regards to Linda, he had no idea at all.

Right now, she seemed a really wholesome, even caring woman; a gentle senpai who truly took care of people.

But in reality, this face he didn't know was incredibly clever, cruel to an extent he could hardly believe.

Not noticing that such were Banri's thoughts, Linda tilted her head a little and touched her chin, as if she were busy thinking. Swinging her hair and raising her eyebrows, she brought her face near to Banri's eyes, as if to look into them. Then,

"And on top of that, that raw tension, was that only a hangover? Whew... I mean, what I just saw, why all the gloom... hmm hmm hmm...?"

She pointed towards Kouko with both her fingertips and with her gaze.

Kouko was seated like a doll on her cushion, surrounded by older students. Though she was a little pale (perhaps due to the beer), she blushed a little, for the time being with a smile on her face.

"...I seem to be correct. You've had a fight with her, right?"

The way Linda said "her" wasn't the simple third-person feminine way of speaking, but was rather the "my girl" way of speaking.

Banri didn't say anything more, so Linda, her lips in a playful pout, said to his ear "Whatever you say, you can count on senpai", lowering her voice to a whispering sigh. Entirely as if she wanted to talk about their shared secret.

Banri, setting his beer mug on the table, acting as much as possible as if he were hearing a joke,

"...Linda-senpai, did you think Kaga-san and I were going out?"

He tried to say it. He intended to.

Setting this and that aside, for the time being, he didn't want to deal with the big misunderstanding looming before him right now. That's how he felt.

"Was I thinking that!? Eh, wasn't it so? But didn't you guys have a really good relationship? Though I thought, since from the beginning you came as a couple to the club?"

He forced a smile. Shaking his head firmly from side to side,

"You were wrong."

He said it clearly. So as to not be misunderstood, simply, distinctly. "Are you kidding!?", Linda said, her eyes growing wide. She looked at Kouko from a little apart, and once more returned her gaze to Banri.

"Is that how it is!? Eh, then... what's that? To put it simply, you were 'more than friends, less than lovers'? Huh. Now I see... well, is that so? That's how it is. Still getting to know each other, month by month. ...Ah ah ah, from now on, after this... ou ou ou, that's how it is. Sorry, I've gotten ahead of myself."

And then, both hands covering her mouth, her shoulders shaking, she was laughing merrily from the bottom of her heart.

"What's with you already?", he said, "'It's good, it's good from now on!?' What's that about? You really seem to be having a fun time here, aren't you?"

Realizing that he could not simply look calmly upon that merry face, and wondering why, Banri knocked down all the beer that remained in his mug. Lined up with him, shoulder to shoulder, Linda threw back her head too, lifting the mug that was in her hand. Like old men, they let out huge sighs. And then,

"This is really hot! Well then, as your senpai, I'll be quietly watching over your promising future! Well, love stories are fu-n. Tell me, tell me more!"

"Tell you... what do you mean?"

"Lo-ve st-o-ri-es! All girls are crazy about love stories, and I, for one, am a girl! Lo-ok look look, Tada Banri, will you tell me e-verything, first thing?"

Look! Look! No! No! While listening to that merry voice with one ear, Banri poured sake with ice from the pitcher into his mug. It didn't matter whether it was sour or soda, either was fine. At any rate, he wanted to shove anything into his body but Linda's voice. And cram it into his brain too. Almost against his will, he forced it down his throat.

"...Especially for senpai, please let me know. How's that sound to you?

Because he thought that Linda would probably be silent, trying to bring up a subject like that. But Linda, making as if to punch Banri softly on the shoulder,

"Whatever, it doesn't matter! I was just thinking it was quite something these days!"

Her expression was still playful around the edges.

"You don't have a boyfriend?"

"No..., I wish..."

"That reminds me: earlier, Kaga-san said it looked like there was something between Linda-senpai and Hosshii-senpai."

"Whoa! ...I mean, wow, she said something like that... no, in reality that can be forgiven... no no, impossible."

"I mean, you've really got it, she said."

"Huh!? Me!? Got it!? She said that!? ...Seriously, I'm gonna give that girl an allowance later. And a big kiss too."

Linda laughed, or in other words, he had succeeded. Drinking some sake, she looked at Banri. Her curiosity was piqued, and she wanted to hear what they'd said.

Rather than answering back "Aren't you awfully curious?", Banri said:

"Didn't you have a boyfriend back in high school?"

Not having an answer, he emptied his next mug in one gulp. While he refilled it from the pitcher,

"---Even hearing that, you answer 'there wasn't' anyhow? There was nobody, right? Yes yes, I understand, senpai. There was nobody. Sure. Nobody, nobody. Nobody at all. It was something that never happened. It's like that. He never existed."

He didn't look at Linda's face as he argued. There was no answer.

At that moment, his field of vision shook strongly, what was close at hand becoming dangerous. Sake overflowing hugely from the top of his mug, he returned some to the pitcher and laughed. I'm useless. Completely drunk. Laughing, he drank some more.

"...Hey, hold on. You're too quick with the pitcher, stop that."

Linda had grabbed and stopped his hand.

Banri's face went white.

Just where he found the strength to shake her off, even he didn't know. From then on, whether he tried to say anything to Linda or not, he didn't know. Really, he didn't know.

"Hey, can't you stop already?"

Dazzled, he couldn't see anything at all.

"Hey, how? How can you do such a thing?"

He couldn't even see Linda's face.

"Isn't such a thing... horrible? Didn't you think of me--- of 'the Tada Banri of that time' as pathetic? Didn't you think it mattered?"

Next to him, the sound of her catching her breath was all that could be heard.

All that came to his mind was his own face. The Tada Banri captured in the picture, with it's thoughtless smile.

That happy-looking guy cheek to cheek with Linda didn't know what the future had in store for him. If he stayed with Linda, it would all be fun. He had laughed making faces like that.

Though he would have told him if he could. From his heart he felt so. He didn't trust that person next to him. He'd had an accident, and was gravely injured, and once he woke up that person gave him this face like 'I never knew you!' Apart from that, saying 'Tell me love stories about you and other girls!' and such, that's the kind of person she was. He wanted to tell her that.

But, what he noticed at the same time, what he was doing to Linda was exactly that, in a manner of speaking.

"...Ah..."

It was only the difference between accident and intention. The end result was the same.

He had just told Linda that he didn't know anything about her.

And not just to Linda. He'd been doing it to everyone he had met up to that time, to his parents, to everybody. Giving this face of 'I don't now anything about you!' He was doing it even now.

"...Aah..."

His face felt cold.

He was bathed in an awful sweat. Down his wet back, his sweat walked unpleasantly. His breathing was painful. He felt dizzy.

"...We may be the same in that way..."

Groaning, he laid his head on the table.

It's hard. It hurts. I cannot breathe. It was difficult and painful, and he couldn't do anything about it.

Forgive me for saying things selfishly.

I am the lowest of the low.

Linda.

Everybody.

Forgive me for having become like this.

I am truly sorry...

"Ba,"

Echoing in his ears, as if it were a scream, that little syllable was like a shriek.

"...Banri...!"

Slowly, gradually, Banri lifted his face; lifted it up like a puppet. Unnoticed by those around, Banri and Linda's exchange heard by nobody, everybody continued talking merrily as they had been not long ago. Face flushed, he laughed like an idiot.

Linda was looking at Banri.

Flushed red all the way to the temples, as if she were angry, as if she were shocked, as if she were crying, as if she were glaring at him, as if relying on him, she stared straight at Banri with an incredible expression.

Her face was swaying, her beautiful silhouette shaking.

But not as much as you might expect. He had been destroyed. He had been broken with a single blow. Practically out of spite, he had casually destroyed the whole fragile world that Linda, for some reason, had been trying to make.

Apart from this, he wondered if there was meaning here. Nothing, he realized. He wanted to go somewhere. Somewhere else. But, that place, where would it be?

Suddenly Banri stood up and stepped over the cushions. "Where're you going? Will you be okay by yourself; you're wobbling", some senpai's voice asked him. He answered automatically that he was going to the bathroom, not feeling well.

Fitting words to action, he strode from the wood-floored room and headed towards the men's bathroom. Sitting on the toilet seat, he locked the door.

His face, covered by both hands, was much much colder than before.

Entirely as if he had died.

He couldn't think about living. Feeling clammy and uncomfortable from a smear of sweat, he had become like a melting ice sculpture.

The bathroom's tiled floor was doing the giant slalom. The designs on the partition walls were spinning. Brushing up his sticky hair, Banri simply opened his eyes wide.

He wondered what would become of him now. He wondered what he should do. He wondered what he wanted to do. Still not understanding anything, as it was, he felt he was quite a mess.

Bam! That moment, from the other side of the door a loud noise rang, making him flinch. Somebody was banging on the door. With all his might, he clasped his hands together.

He heard a voice on the verge of crying asking his forgiveness.

"...Who is it...?"

I was scared! Shouting like that, her voice broke, pausing.

"...I don't understand... Who is it...?"

You were like a bomb, completely. If I were to touch you the wrong way, then I would maybe lose you again. And perhaps you would disappear again. Thinking like that, I didn't know what I should do. I still don't know. I'm still scared, scared, I cannot help but be scared. It may have been my fault, and if it were my fault what should I do, if again... thinking like that, I was afraid, and helpless.

"...I, forgot... altogether..."

That day, I *did* go to give you an answer.

"...Everything became nothing..."

Though I was delayed, I wanted to answer you. I wanted you to hear my answer. Banri. But I didn't get there in time.

Hey, was I to blame?

Was it my fault?

Because I didn't get there on time, then, what of it? Was I like that... to you? Show me Banri, answer me. Was it my fault?

But you didn't tell me that if I showed up late, I would lose you and you would disappear completely!

"If it ended there, like that, wasn't it nothing!?"

* * *

The wind blowing through him, Banri was at a loss.

He had promised to be waiting right at the middle of the long, long wooden bridge. But, so early

in the morning, any other place would have been better. Though it was a bit late to be thinking about that now.

Both his hands stuffed into his pockets, at first he watched steadily off in the direction from which Linda ought to be coming. But though he waited and waited, her form not appearing, the emptiness in his chest becoming gradually worse, Banri turned his gaze towards the surface of the water.

Though he gazed all the way down to the other end of the bridge, it was a truly empty time, waiting for her to show up.

It was long past the promised time.

He wondered if her not coming was her answer.

Hearing music he pulled his cell-phone from his pocket and checked it once more to see if there weren't any texts or other confirmations. Anyway, since nobody else was around, he realized that sound leaking from his headphones didn't matter. Raising the volume, he looked out over the familiar scenery.

The majestic, even wild Mt. Fuji.

In the distance, snow remained yet on the many, hazy mountain peaks. After that, city. Hazy with profusely blooming cherry trees, a wide flood plain. Thread after thread flowing in parallel, the river below his eyes a little cloudy, blue tinged with gray. Sturdy old concrete bridges. Paper mills. Thick smoke-stacks. More and more like that on the other side, the river's current continued flowing.

He was chilled to the soles of his feet, but for quite a while he couldn't bring himself to leave.

As it was, wasn't it going to get awkward, waiting here for an eternity? Vainly waiting for the figure of the person who wasn't coming, stood up like a fool, who in spite of having obtained the position of cheerful rounin student without even having studied. He wondered if he was going to suddenly turn into an idiot.

"...Waiting like this, I can't say it's good..."

"Jeez, you idiot", he muttered to himself.

His wish might come true, eventually, if he kept on waiting, but for his heart to have granted such an extension would be a mistake. 'No' in this way was clearly a slap-down, it would have been better to have a clean break. At the very least, he wouldn't have to keep on standing right in the middle of the bridge, by himself, alone.

As it was, he had become like the bronze statue on the headlands overlooking the tea plantations covering the slopes. It was there. A splendid bronze statue of one of the great local men.

Looking down upon the river from a cheerful spot, nice people looking at him kindly, silently standing there still. Quite like my present self.

Casting his eyes downward, he took a breath, and started walking.

It was in that moment.

"...?"

It was perhaps from the earphones blocking his hearing, but that was one strange echo he heard.

The cord pulled back, his eyes to the bridge, it came flying at him: a white light...

* * *

The voice had stopped.

Still barricaded in the bathroom stall, Banri raised his head.

The person outside the door was no longer there. Impatient with the Banri who just would not get up, she had left.

Banri took the hard handle and opened the door. There was no longer anybody there in the narrow space he saw. It was too late. The person trying to open her heart to him wasn't there.

Stepping carefully on wobbly feet, he walked out. As if he were holding onto the pillar, he peeked into the party room. The scene there was unchanged from before, nothing different.

Drunken students, second-hand jokes of uncertain meaning, laughter loud enough to leave you deaf. Somebody was clapping, the sound echoing loudly.

And then, Linda was there amongst the people. Looking a little tired, she leaned against the screen, mug in one hand, joining in the conversation. Laughing, she brushed up her hair, sitting at ease.

That she wasn't going to return to him at all, she knew from the start. Now he knew. Entirely, now.

Banri staggered over to the shoe racks. A voice called out, "Tada-kun?", but he pretended not to hear as he pulled out his shoes. The grey New Balance shoes. Sticking them on his feet, he left the place as if nothing could prevent him.

He was bitter, in pain, unable to breathe, and on top of all that his head and stomach hurt. He might even throw up shortly.

Still, as he walked, the cool night breeze on his face felt good. He didn't want to think about hard things, and proceeded straight down the main street. Like a machine, his feet continued to move, dispassionately.

He was unbearably sad.

If he were to be asked why, specifically, his current self would not be able to answer entirely.

His living self was sad because he had been cut off from his past.

He'd tried carefully not to look so far, but being made to confront "what was missing" as if he hadn't noticed was sad.

Banri's past must have been pitiful.

Suddenly he lost his life, his family, his friends, the girl he liked, everything; his very existence was erased. His current self was rewriting the life that had existed under the name of Tada Banri, making it as if it had never been.

Forgive me! Forgive me! Tada Banri. He had a feeling it wouldn't matter how many times he repeated it. Forgive me! What's more, the new world that was prepared, that Linda was trying to maintain somehow, keeping up appearances, hiding her tears and protecting it for him, I, with this hand, have already shattered it. I am truly sorry.

Sorry.

Already, there may be nothing he could do.

There was no technique for living without sadness. It would last forever. As long as he lived.

"..."

Suddenly he was wiping away tears with the back of his hand, dripping shamefully from his nose.

This sadness was always here. He had known it. Yet, he did not want to look straight at it, only avoid it. Simply to live and pretend to have forgotten.

Even in the past, it had been right there following him. And then "what was missing" --- that guy, always with precise timing, would tap him on the shoulder from behind. *Tap tap.* Hey, Tada Banri.

'Did you forget I wasn’t there?'

So he would say.

Turning around, Banri would look.

At the nobody there.

At the nothing there.

At only "what was missing".

That guy has no body. In truth, he doesn't have words either. Still, he's there, a menace to his current self's existence. He wondered what would satisfy him, when he was pushed to the edge of a cliff. He wondered if he would forgive him for not falling head over heels.

Clinging behind him any way it could, not leaving him, that guy's other name could be said to be 'his past'. With all due respect.

Right, left, right, left. Anyway, Banri kept moving his feet, not resting. Looking back at the emptiness behind him terrifying, he could not stop.

Please, leave me alone just this once. Banri pleaded as he walked. I know you're right behind me. I haven't forgotten. But, for just now, he wanted to keep walking. If he could, he wanted to set aside his sadness.

Since I really do understand, why don't you leave me alone--=

"...Whoa!?"

Poof!

In reality grabbed by the shoulder from behind, Banri's whole body shook as if he'd leapt into the air. He was scared. He'd been shocked. Really, really,

"So, sorry! You surprised me, and I didn't think..."

He really was surprised. He thought he'd died.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

Standing behind Banri was Kouko, out of breath.

Her hair was mussed up, as if she were having a hard time, and in her hand were her own and Banri's bags. As she passed Banri's over to him she spoke.

"All of a sudden, your bag, you'd gone and left it... I was surprised, 'eh, eh'... anyway I've got it,

I brought it for you... haa, enough already... oh that hurts!"

Combing her bangs across her face as if they bothered her, Kouko continued. Taking another breath, her eyes sparkled, probably from the headlights of some car going down the main street.

"Hey, really... what the heck, what've you done? Did something happen between you and Linda-senpai?"

He seized his strangely leaping heart tightly from over his clothing.

"That answer..."

Suddenly, he breathed in, filling his body.

From his left heel, to his right toe, the oxygen was being squeezed out by the pressure in his stomach.

"...The answer was yeeeeeeeeeeesss!"

All at once he exploded. Shouting, he dashed off with all his might.

"Eh!? Eh, eh eh!? Tada-kun!?"

The answer 'yes'. It was from his past with Linda.

"What!? Your bag!? Hold on!"

"Nooooooooooooooooo!"

The answer ‘no'. I will not wait. I want to get out of here. I was to go somewhere else. And now, I want to shake off that guy clinging behind me, I want to leave him behind and I want to leave anybody else following behind, escaping by sheer speed.

Swinging both arms at the shoulders, both feet recklessly refusing the ground.

Taking a strong grip on the asphalt, each of his feet in turn sent the weight of his body flying vigorously forward.

He felt that the speed he gained from the next kick was like an explosion.

"Tada-kun! Wait!"

They were light. His feet--- no, his shoes were light.

Was this speed given to him by Linda?

Could this body move like this? It was the first time he'd been this fast. In the shoulders, arms,

back, chest, hips, thighs, knees, ankles and toes. Where had such flexibility, such power been hidden? Banri ran through the night streets like a wild animal. Wanting to leave everything behind, he ran, his whole body desperate.

From behind, this instant's frame, one frame, all of the current Banri is stretching out. He wanted to tear apart all the competition. With all his speed, he wanted to win the race by a wide margin.

"Why are you running away!? Is it something I did!? Am I that awful!?"

Awfully fast, from behind, Kouko's voice like a shout reached him.

"Nooooooooooooooooo!"

"Please! Wait!"

It's no, no no! The answer is 'no', these feet didn't want to stop. They didn't want to stop until he had gotten away. Banri wanted to leave this instant, this very 'now', behind. For that reason, he was running through this night.

At the fork in the road, choosing on a hunch, he went left. Another fork. This time, to the right. At the next, right again. Next, at a three-way junction, he headed down a familiar route. He had no idea where this street he had just chosen went on to, and it seemed he already didn't know which streets he'd chosen to get to this point.

It was as if since he'd plainly been granted a life up to now, his days would continue coming.

On the whole, 'yes' and 'no' were successive decisions. As if 'yes' and 'no' were the mesh of an infinite net he was entering, he did not know the correct path. He did not know the paths he had taken in his past. But if he could come to know them, then if he could come to undo all of his mistakes up to now...

Thinking on it, he surprised himself.

'Maybe I can return', he thought.

If he could return once more down the same street, if the right way home, the one and only route could be found, then for sure, ...Linda would be there. Linda was always there, waiting for Banri's return.

"...But! Noo! What the...!"

He could not. Because Banri's memories were lost. Already, he could not follow the way back. He did not know the right way home. No matter how many times he looked back, he could not find there the figure of his own past.

Therefore, all he could do was move forward. It was a much better choice than to stand there, frozen in place, stuck in sadness over what he was missing, still not knowing the way back and crying about it.

Run away, escape, run like crazy.

Shaking lose, he ran so fast nobody could catch him. Banri, now, chose his way and flew down it. And then again, he made his next choice. Living, to the very end, is a sequence of choices.

Yes? No?

The street before his eyes continued on to an overpass. Under the crossing, there was a huge flow of vehicles. The swarm of headlights shone like madness. Running as he was, his sadness, even his speed was great enough to turn it all to nothing. No, never--- he tried to laugh by himself at his own thoughts, but his feet kept moving.

It would be easy. For sure.

Must he take another painful, agonizing breath? Must he say sorry over and over again? Is there any other way than to be sorrowful? If he wanted that to stop, he needed only to keep running, as he was. Throw himself into it completely. Headlong.

Look, right there, in front of you.

The pure white, intense light is a mouth gaping wide to receive you at any time in the future.

Choose.

By yourself.

"...The"

Yes? No?

"...The answer..."

In that moment, he stumbled. His head was jerked back when it didn't keep up with the rest of his body.

Something slammed into him from behind with great force, knocking him off to the front and side. Banri shouted as he tumbled hugely, doing a somersault.

Running his back into the overpass barrier after one turn around, he groaned and started to pass out. A white hand extended, limply, to grasp his ankle. It was already a horror, completely so.

"I, caught, you...!"

A shriek came from his throat. Shoved from behind--- in short, hit, probably by that fallen bicycle. And then, the one who rode it,

"I mean... I haven't knocked you over...!"

Kaga Kouko.

It could only be her. Only she could be doing such absurd things in this world.

Charging Banri from behind with the bicycle, she must've crashed altogether. Her whole body was in an awful state. Her proud hair shoved all over her face, she was even bleeding from her cheeks. Holding on to Banri's ankle hard, there was even blood beneath her fingernails.

"Wh, why...!?"

He must've shouted that. Anybody would ask, if they'd had such a thing done to them.

"Why!? Why were you chasing me so stubbornly!?"

"Because you were running away!"

Speaking sharply, as if stabbing him, Kouko, already grabbing Banri's ankle with one hand, now grabbing his knee as if clawing her way up, then grabbing onto his thighs, and then, oof, she was clinging to the still fallen Banri's body.

"What the heck... what are you trying to do!?"

Then, Banri fallen to the ground, Kouko on top of him, she cried.

Her shoulders shaking, with awful strength she wrapped both her arms around Banri's body.

"Where did you try to go!? Don't do that ever again, don't go anywhere, don't go running away! Don't go somewhere my hand, my voice cannot reach! Don't go anywhere, stay where I am all the time! I mean, prepare yourself, because I'm not letting go!"

Her mouth still pushed up against his chest, she spoke in a distinctly teary voice, as if she had shouted herself hoarse. That warm breath burnt Banri's heart to ashes.

"...That... what? What do you mean...?"

"Weren't you chasing after me!? Well, this time it was me chasing you! ...I mean, look! I'm doing the catching! Tada-kun is already caught! From now on I am not letting you go!"

"But... you don't love me..."

Turning serious, Kouko lifted her face and looked into Banri's eyes.

In those damp eyes, everything was reflected, glittering brightly. They twinkled and shook so strongly he thought, "Is there anything in the world not reflected there?" Banri's eyes were that dazzled looking back.

Quietly, Kouko breathed in. Her lips trembling, he realized she was searching for words.

"Speaking like that, I cannot just say 'yes'. Really, ...I wanted to answer. But in that moment... no, a little before then. Hey, please, listen. I wanted to talk with Tada-kun. That Mitsuo confessing to Supersonic didn't hurt me. What hurt me, was me."

Tears were still falling from her two eyes.

"Everything came easily to Supersonic's hand. That's what it looked like to me. A fun life, new friends, and then Mitsuo too came easily to her hand, ...even you, you saw Supersonic. Even you, perhaps, would have come easily to her hand. I thought, I, I... what was the difference between me and that girl? How different am I from her, who was discarding the gift that would not come to my hand, but came easily to hers? How much more worthy am I? ...If I was thinking like that, hurting, I couldn't be but miserable."

"'I saw'... Oka-chan? 'Came to her hand?' Me to Oka-chan's? Eh, but,"

"If you saw! I didn't see! ...Being seen! ...You saw her, she was seen by me too. ...It was awful. Incredibly. It was incredibly awful. It was scary. ...But me thinking such things... was the worst."

She wiped once around her eyes with the back of her hand, her lips quivered a few times and then,

"Admitting to myself that I was being attracted more and more by you, was for me very hard."

Kouko spoke as if she were in pain.

"I don't like a woman who can be completely OK with smashing many years of unrequited love and staying with that particular person. I don't think it's right. It is not something I can trust. Is that really love? It isn't just choosing somebody nice because I've been hurt? Am I not just wishing for a scapegoat, one taking away the feelings I could not communicate? Told, '...You're wrong, absolutely wrong, I've said it many times,' I am at a disadvantage. Saying, 'Really?' I've come to distrust myself, even."

Constantly wiping off on to Banri's shirt, Kouko's tears were darkening it.

"In my vision of the future, you see, saying 'no' was the right thing to do. You told me you liked me. My answer, no. 'We cannot go out together.' And then, you gave me a second chance. Even so, no. 'We cannot go out together.' That way, becoming perfectly alone, being forced to grow up, becoming trustworthy, no longer needing to doubt myself, everything from that point... that would be right. If I could do it according to my 'scenario'."

Somehow putting some strength into her trembling lips, Kouko smiled.

Another tear fell when she smiled, but those eyes didn’t lose their sparkle.

Despite clinging to somebody like Banri, falling to the dirty ground and crying, Kouko seemed to be happy.

"...For that reason, I wanted to wait. My heart always wanted to shout 'yes'. I thought that if I shouted, the world would change. To the point of forgiving myself my own behavior, even as I came to like you I drifted along, thinking it 'bad' or 'incorrect', living unworthily but not thinking about it. Until the time came, I wanted to keep waiting. But... I could not follow my 'scenario'. You said, 'I will not wait.' You said, 'I'm not chasing you anymore.' In that moment I thought, 'Well, as things are now, we are separated.' To which I said, '...Forget the 'scenario'!' Whether it was bad, or whatever, even being wrong is fine! Not being correct is fine! For me, there is something I cannot lose! My heart shouted that. Therefore, as for me, towards you,"

Even more, both of Kouko's arms tightened.

"...As for me, I like Tada-kun."

What would happen tomorrow he did not know. There was no point in dwelling on yesterday. There was only now. It wouldn't do to be cautious now, absolutely not. Kouko said it like that, as if she were telling all, in one long, long breath.

"...Really... Kaga-san..."

Ah, surrender--- lifting both hands high in relief, Banri too, then and there, put his arms around Kouko.

After something like that, what in the world could he say?

Able to do so, they simply embraced, gave to each other their body warmth, and simply confirmed their feelings were the same, the one to the other.

"...Would it be OK if you didn't dump me? It would be a favor!"

Saying something like that in a nasal voice, he pushed his nose firmly against Kouko's disheveled face. His lips too. Kouko was crying again after all. He bent down to her forehead, and then,

"...What...?"

"...Eh...?"

Suddenly, Kouko's arms let go.

Surprisingly quickly, faster than he could have said, "Don't let go!" Kouko separated herself

from Banri.

"Oh, oh, oh," Kouko herself looked back strangely, behind her the shadow of a person. Beyond that, several more. He gasped, startled. Before his eyes, the still sniffling Kouko was drawn back and made to stand,

"This person stole my bicycle!"

She was forced to sit before the boy who was pointing at her.

Before she knew it, in the area of the overpass patrol cars had stopped, their red lights illuminating the scene of the crime. Made to stand, uniformed police surrounded her like a wall.

"Ho, hold on! What are you saying! Didn't I say I was bo, borrowing it... I was just about to bring it back..."

With strict faces, they communicated something back their fellow officers via their radio. The boy, once more pointing at Kouko with both hands,

"Absolutely, it's no mistake! Right after I got off my bike in front of the convenience store, it was stolen by this person!"

Finally grasping the situation, Banri stood up too, "No, no no no!" He tried to apologize for the confused situation and to get closer to Kouko's side, but the solid backs of all the uniformed men stopped him completely. He could only hear Kouko's desperate voice.

"Wrong, he's wrong! No matter what, there was an emergency... wait a minute! Just wait! Please let me explain! If I explain, you'll surely understand, there was a perfectly good reason, ah, hold on, kyaa!"

Before Banri's eyes, Kouko spun around and thump, she was shut up in the patrol car. Wow... witnessing an arrest at first hand... what's more, of his freshly minted girlfriend... though he didn't say things like that,

"Ka, Kaga-saan! Seriously, please wait, please listen to the story! Kaga-saan!"

"Tada-kun! Call me at home! Call our house phone!"

"But you haven't told me your home number! Excuse me, really, please wait a bit!"

While waving her finger from left to right, one lone police-woman stood in front of Banri, blocking his way. And then one simple phrase:

"No waiting !!"

The End

Postscript

At about the same time as when I finished writing this manuscript, what had been my rather long time favorite notebook computer fell into what was frankly critical condition (a.k.a. senility), stopping dead without even having saved my data, so I replaced it with a new one. With a new machine, for the first time I would start punching out reams of material.

Still, as you might expect, it was brand new. Whether starting up, or doing anything, the word was fast. It was fast, but. ...What should I do? What a mess, it's hard to use. I'm a little teary-eyed.

Because the old machine was so easy to use, what I really wanted was to have exactly the same thing, but new. Unfortunately, that very same model I'd bought so many years before was simply not available, and that same manufacturer's new model... Anyway, sure that it would look similar, that it wouldn't be all that different coming from the same manufacturer, rather than carefully checking out and trying machines from all over the place, shallow, superficial me went and bought it only on sight... though going from appearances was awfully wrong...

First of all, for typing characters like this, the keyboard is bulky, crude and uncomfortable. The bulk and height aren't treating my wrists very well. If I try to adjust the height of the chair or the table, then either way it's too low for my eyes. I'm not used to wide screens. I set the width of my editor to the number of characters on a book page. I've always been of the school of horizontal writing, but now things are a bit clipped vertically. When I go to verify up and down, I can't see very much without scrolling. In the little bit of time I've been writing this, the upper half of my back and my right shoulder are dying.

I suppose I do get a little too worked up over things, but of course in this line of work they say that your body is your capital, and in any case, before deadlines, staring at it ten hours or more, things happen if you have personal computers. I've definitely become sensitive to what they feel like as I use them. ...In 20/20 hindsight, if I had the free time to write with such a smug look on my face, then why didn't I spend more time in examining and understanding it before I bought it...?

...Well, though. If I think back on it. No less than ten books were written on that old machine. The paint on the edges of the keyboard completely flaked off from so many years of hand-sweat, hardly anybody could miss that the machine was wearing out.

My body, eyes and even my head had become entirely accustomed to the feel of it, and it looked like I would quickly get to where I could use the new machine in exactly the same way, but from the very start that was not reasonable. Even using this machine, writing manuscripts like crazy, by the time it's surface has been coated by hand-sweat, I will probably not even think

about how it feels to use it anymore. Or rather, this new machine, it seems to be made of materials such that no matter how much hand-sweat it gets, wetting and wetting it, it will never wear down. If I were to try and chip the paint, I'd damage my own hand, seems like. In that area, of course, technology is progressing, wouldn't you say? The times have caught up with hand-sweat, it seems.

Friend: "My hands have gotten painfully dry..."

Me: "Aren't my hands moist? Shall I moisten yours?"

Friend: "Eh!? That's fine, that's fine! I don't need it!"

Me: "Well, there's no need to hold back."

(Grab...)

Friend: "Ahh...! Why'd you get me wet... stupid idiot!"

---That was the way we talked back and forth since student days even until now, over and over again endlessly the same, my circle of classmates saying, "Hand sweat?" I recommend this machine. I have thoroughly and completely immersed you in my moaning and groaning, but now am not going to reveal to you the manufacturer's name...

This "Golden Time 2: The Answer is YES", written with my favorite old machine, has become my most recent book.

You kindly accepted this book to your hands, all of you. For all the fellowship I've received from you, thank you very much. I offer you my heartfelt gratitude. Really really, truly thank you! Drinking and getting drunk, drinking and getting drunk, only that the whole second volume, wasn't that fun?

With a ways to go yet, I keep moving on. The third volume is scheduled for publication in the height of summer, in the bright sun! If it's all right with you, please let us continue this relationship we have. While soaking this fun machine with my sweaty hands, I'm thinking "I want to type."

Being as was in mid-manuscript, being made to change my computer, even if it was on its deathbed, was really dangerous.

My deadline creeping dangerously close, the moment the thought came to me, "Is writing hard (five times as fast as life itself) really all that necessary?" down my sides, pop, pop... something like mosquito bites broke out.

Was it mosquitos? Ticks? Fleas? While thinking of such things, I washed my clothes in a frenzy, and ran my futon through the dryer, but the popping only got worse. And then there was a horrible itching. Scratching myself, I got little bumps. What's more, was it my imagination, or

was my body getting awfully sluggish, from my head to my shoulders, my hips, my joints hurting terribly. Far from writing my manuscript, even just sitting up straight became difficult.

This wasn't normal, of course. What kind of venomous insect had gotten me? When the dermatologist took a look at me, with only one glance he declared them to be shingles.

He said the ganglia on my right side had been afflicted by a virus like chickenpox, making it hurt here and there. It seemed that quite a few people suffered from this rather major disease. ...I was getting old.

"It's a condition of people who's resistance has lowered. Right now, your body is like that of a 60-year old man."

That's the way the doctor seemed to be talking.

But feeling like I were a 60-year old man? I mean, that's wrong, it's not like that. Old... old man...? Eh? Not even a grandmother...?

By chance, around the same time there was a friend who was worried about getting shingles. If I were to explain to her, "We'd be like 60-year old men," she would be shocked, of course. "That so? But aren't we already female?" ...So it seems. It's sad, isn't it? Somebody's gone and stolen our shining middle age! And then we were given a Y-chromosome as a parting gift...

Up til now I have completely and masochistically labeled myself an old woman, but I've not thought "I'm an old man," of course. I am revising my opinion. I am an old man. Even if only a little bit, whatever should happen to such as me in the future, the possibilities, I am suddenly feeling those kinds of things falling away. Old man, eh… already, I have nothing to lose. Even if I am thinking this is less than my optimal condition. An unfeeling demon shogun. Old man Takemiya, not feeling his age.

Well then, you have all read it from one end to the other. Once again, I thank you having going out together with me! If I have given you even a short moment of enjoyment, I am more than anybody fortunate! The third volume is next, if you are interested in more, whatever happens, let's get back together!

And now, Komatsu Eeji-sensei, manager Yuasa-sama, from now on without interruption, let's work well together!

竹 宮 優 子
Takemiya Yuyuko

Translator's Notes

Comedic Duo

↕A certain pair of comedians, known as "The Touch". Twin brothers, Takuya and Kazuya Tsunoda, born November 10, 1982. See サ・たっち for more information. Unfortunately, it is in Japanese only for the time being. One of their signature lines is "Chotto, chotto chotto!", roughly meaning "Hold on, hold on hold on!". You may substitute "Wait a bit", or "Wait" for "Hold On" if you wish.

O-Camera

↕There is a play on words here. The first phrase, "岡 ヰ 波 ナメラ", means literally, "Oka Chinami Camera". The next phrase, "略 してまかめら", means literally, "Omitted homely girls" or "Ignored outsiders." The second part of the second phrase is pronounced "o-camera", which sounds the same as using "camera" with an honorific, indicating that it belongs to somebody else.

Jokai

↕Banri uses the word '女 怪 ' (jokai = female monster), but Two Dimensions understands it as the word '魚 介 ' (gyokai: marine products; seafood; fish and shellfish).

Matanai

↕Throughout this chapter, there are repeated references to not waiting. Whenever this is done, the word 待 たない (matanai) is used. The word simply means 'will not wait', or 'not waiting', with no indication as to who, how many or what gender will not be waiting. Usually, it is Banri asserting that he will not wait anymore. Here, at the very end of the chapter and book, the policewoman is probably telling Banri that they will not wait for him, but the word is the same, so I needed to adjust it to fit better in English.